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PART I.

I.

It was a cold and gloomy night. Shaken by the autumnal gales, the great trees of the forest of St. Germain, groaned as they bowed their tops over a narrow, deeply cut road. At times a stronger gust than usual drove away the clouds so that the moon shone through the foliage. Then could be seen a strangely shaped vehicle in the hollow of this road, a something that was neither cart nor carriage, yet it rolled along, for a squeaking sound of ungreased wheels could be heard above the dull roar of the storm passing amidst the upper branches. It had the shape of a long box with side openings, and was surmounted by a stove pipe. A house upon wheels, it seemed, and one tenanted, too, for jets of light darted out upon the hedges on either side.

The stony ravine followed by this travelling abode turned sharply round a clump of old oaks and then ascended rather steeply. At the foot of the slope there was a halt, followed by the clear and eadenced sound of a horse pawing the pebbles; then the queer turn-out which had no doubt encountered an unforeseen rut tilted over like a ship eaught in a squall, and remained careened on a huge stump most happily placed there to prevent its complete wreck.

"By the trumpets of Jericho the nasty brute has spilt us!" roared a hoarse voice from the interior of the foundered van, at the edge of the ditch.

A lamentable groan from the front of the conveyance responded to this outcry, but nothing stirred. The driver evidently renounced the idea of getting the horse, which had just fallen, up on to its feet again, and it seemed to be reconciled to its collapse, for it did nothing but snort noisily without wasting breath in useless efforts.

"Alcindor!" yelled the hoarse voice, "don't you hear me, you good-for-nothing?"

At the same time the rear-door of the wreck flew open violently, and a man leaped forth who ran round to the front. He carried a lantern in his left hand and swung it under the driver's nose, while his right held a long cane with which he set to lashing the fellow's legs. The effect of these two operations was not long deferred. The recipient drew back at first, dazzled by the light, but on feeling the blows he dropped the reins and tumbled over on the farther side of the shaft. Still he seemed neither even much surprised nor much frightened, for he sat down on the slope of

the ditch, and shoved his hands in his pockets like a man hardened to accidents and corrections. He was a tall, lanky young fellow whose too short body rested on interminable legs. His long hair was of that warm tow colour inclining very much to yellow; his face was wan and beardless, his nose pointed, and his grey eyes were high up in his head. The dominant expression of his countenance was one of resignation joined to a certain subdued enthusiasm. Under this dull mask an observer would have divined an enlightened man veiling his reveries, or an inventor modest over his discoveries. His costume was simple, but peculiar; gaiters once white enveloped his thin shins that unpleasantly terminated in immense feet encased in leather goloshes; over his bony shoulders floated a much too ample pea-jacket, with the cut of the short cape cloak of the Launces of Elizabethan plays, and his head was covered with the flat pointed cap of a mediæval stage captain.

This grotesque personage was visibly young, though he had in some respects an aged appearance. His master—the man who jumped out of the bemired vehicle—offered a vivid contrast to him. Thickset, curly locked, bearded and, above all, sunburnt, he realised at first glauce the model Hercules of travelling shows. His vigorous biceps and enormous calves stood out in relief under his alpaca coat and corduroy trousers; but through some odd anomaly his dull and regular features denoted a total absence of energy. There was an indescribable neatness about his common clothes and his carefully brushed-out luxuriant whiskers, which gave him the air of an accountant masquerading as an athlete.

This Philistine Samson folded his arms, and tragically contemplated the tow-headed hobbledohoy and the poor thin grey which, now on its knees, philosophically cropped the short wayside grass. But his menacing silence did not last long, and he resumed his objurgations with the cracked organ peculiar to open-air orators.

"You slug," grumbled he, flourishing his dreadful wand, "however did you bungle so as to send the concern into a hole on a macadamised highway in the midst of an imperial forest? You were napping, I'm sure; you were nodding like the overgrown sloth you are!"

"Governor," responded the hapless Jehu in a slow, monotonous voice, "I am not going to deny I was asleep. Sleep is a requirement of the human organism always proportioned to the age of the subject, and as I have got over my six-and-twentieth summer, I have a right to a minimum of eight hours' rest. Now, mark what follows: we quitted Poissy fair-ground as midnight struck, and it ought now to be about six ante-meridian, if I may judge by the position of the Great Bear relative to the zenith. I am therefore in harmony with nature."

"But you are not in harmony with me, you wretched clown," interrupted the hirsute man, "and I do not pay you for sleeping."

"As for the highway," proceeded the lanky individual; imperturbably, "I maintain that it was in no wise benefited by the ingenious invention of the Scotchman MacAdam, to judge by the profundity of the ruts and pits to be met with, and as for the qualification of imperial which you bestow upon this forest, which is rather a wood, I would respectfully offer the observation, governor—"

"Oh, shut up! by a thousand million of trumpets! enough, you idiot! keep your patter for the show-door, and more fitly help me to get out of the slough. We have gone wrong, that's sure and certain, for we ought to have reached St. Germain long ago; and if I had not been such a fool

as to snooze also, I should have twigged that you were getting us into a mess."

"Look here, governor, as you are forty-seven years old, you do not need more than six hours' sleep," observed the charioteer mockingly.

"Whether that's so or not," said the master vexedly, "just take that lantern and show the way that I may see where we have got to. Régine," he shouted, turning towards the van, "stay there, my girl, till we come back."

No one answered from within to this piece of advice, whereupon the strong man added to himself with a shrug of the shoulders: "What an ass! I'm always forgetting that the lass is deaf and dumb. Step out, Alcindor, and be alive!"

The person answering to this ridiculous name obeyed this time without a murmur, and began climbing the slope before which the unlucky nag had come to grief. Soaked by rain, the road was in a dreary state, so that the showman, much less nimble than skinny Alcindor, stumbled at every step, and poured out streams of bad language. After ten minutes of this rough progress, the two men came out into a cross-way surrounded by ancient trees, where five or six roads ran out in all directions, and a sign-post rose in the centre.

"Hurrah! we are saved! there's a sign-post," cried the driver, hurrying forward.

Arriving at the foot of the sign-post, he lifted the lantern to the full stretch of his long arms and managed to decipher the inscription, which he read in a triumphant tone:

"Étoile du Chêne-Capitaine! A fine name! There must be a legend attached to it, and if I had time for such frivolities, I would write a romance about it."

"Shut up, fool," growled the showman; "instead of talking rubbish you had better find our right road amongst the lot."

"That's no easy matter, governor," sadly replied Alcindor, scratching his head. "Oh, I spy a light!" he added, pointing to the road on his left.

"A woodcutter's hut! that will do for us. Come along gaily," said Hercules, calmed by this unexpected discovery.

But Alcindor did not stir. "It's on the move, governor," he said, shaking his head. "I am inclined to believe that we have before us one of those terrestrial, gaseous emanations commonly called jack-o'-lanterns."

In point of fact, the remote light wavered about and sometimes disappeared altogether.

"That's queer!" muttered the thick-built man. "It's more likely the lantern of a keeper going his rounds. We had better have a peep at him without his seeing us. Drowse our glim and come on softly."

Alcindor executed the order as one well accustomed to night rambles, and imitated his master in making for the light with all the precautions habitual to poachers. The weather was singularly favourable for nocturnal watching. The tempest had redoubled in violence, and the splash of steps on the sward was lost in the whish-whish of the leaves shaken by the western wind. Hence the inquisitive pair, without betraying their presence, reached a fresh-cut clearing behind an enormous pile of symmetrically heaped up logs—and beyond this wooden wall the light they had seen from a distance lit up the white trunks of the birches. A dull and regular sound reached the strained ears of the two watchers. They glided along in a stooping attitude to the foot of the pile and noiselessly rose up. Thanks to his long

legs, Alcindor could look over the barrier, and what he beheld on the other side no doubt delighted him so little that he grabbed his master's arm and whispered in his ear :

"Slope, governor, slope's the word !"

II.

"WHAT'S the matter with you, you donkey ?" demanded the strong man in an undertone.

"Look there !" muttered Alcindor, pointing to a colossal oak tree standing by itself in the middle of the clearing, "they are burying someone—"

"Or something," corrected the showman, but slightly participating in his driver's emotion. "We must find out which before we make off."

Gliding along the pile, the thickset mountebank found a large stone a little way off, and noiselessly mounted it. Thanks to this footstool, he was able to see the same as his clown all that was taking place some twenty paces beyond them. The light which had attracted them came from a large lantern hung on the lower boughs of a tree at the foot of which two men armed with spades were filling up an oblong pit. Their task seemed near its end and the pair hastened as if eager to have done.

At such an hour and in such a place, this grave-digger's work looked strange enough. Men do not come on a stormy night into the woods just to plant a tree, and besides, the nocturnal workers were neither labourers nor peasants. Clad in overcoats carefully buttoned up and wearing new silk top-hats shining in the lantern rays, they seemed dressed for some ceremony, and this rather official costume was in singular disaccord with the manual labour to which they bent themselves with such ardour. One of them had even neglected to remove his gloves so that he wielded the spade with hands imprisoned in the black kid of deep mourning. The mystery surrounding the strangers was evident ; but the real aim of their efforts remained difficult to divine, for the pit was all but filled up when Alcindor and his master took possession of their post, and the earth so hastily thrown in might as reasonably have hidden a corpse as a treasure. Whatever it was, the sight was one calculated to rivet to the spot the inquisitive pair who had been brought there by chance, and they watched what went on at the foot of the tree with equal attention but with very opposite thoughts.

Alcindor, who had gradually edged up to his master until he pressed close against him, was ostensibly the prey to a fright, the more deeply felt from his not daring to express it either by words or gestures. He believed he was witnessing the final scene of a tragedy fated in the future to be one of the celebrated cases of an assize court, and, instinctively dreading judicial adventures, he cursed the accident which had brought him to the *Etoile du Chêne-Capitaine*. On the other hand, the strong man, since he had been able to see over the pile of wood, had assumed the satisfied mien of a speculator who has come across a good thing. His sullen face lighted up and his little eyes sparkled with greed. It was clear he thought he possessed a secret that would be convertible into cash by-and-by, and he little cared for the immediate consequences of his indiscretion.

"It's over, governor ; let's be off," whispered the unfortunate Jehu.

In fact the pit was filled up and the man in the black gloves folded his arms

like a working-man reposing after some painful toil. His companion was scraping up dead leaves to hide the freshly stirred soil, and did it with remarkable dexterity. In less than a minute, the mould was levelled, and all concealed under the thick litter furnished by autumn; and, beyond the witnesses of this strange scene, no one could suspect the mysterious undertaking that had just been accomplished. Order once re-established at the foot of the great oak, the careful worker shouldered the two spades and rapidly crossed the open space to hide them amongst the brambles bordering the underwood in that quarter.

"Good! they are going to leave and we shall be able to solve the mystery."

These words, hissed into Alcindor's ear, made him shiver, as he had no taste for compromising enterprises.

"But, governor," he objected timidly, "Régine is all alone there, and I fear—"

"Régine needs no company since she is dumb," abruptly interrupted the master, "and she is not such a coward as you. Shut your mouth and open your ears; the gentlemen look like coming this way."

Whilst his acolyte put away the tools, the man left under the tree had taken down and extinguished the lantern, and the eclipse of this illumination rendered the faint light of early dawn more apparent. After taking these precautions, the two diggers joined each other and did indeed direct their steps towards the pile of wood. They walked slowly and silently side by side, like men absorbed in serious thoughts. The taller of the two, he who carried the lantern, was of medium stature, slender frame and stylish bearing. The other, apparently an older man, had a huge head deep set between uneven shoulders, and an odd, broken gait; he did not exactly limp, but he seemed to have two left legs, they worked so discordantly. This was all the Hercules had time to observe, for, on seeing the men draw near, he hastened to descend and cower down at the foot of the logs of wood. Alcindor wanted no asking to imitate this prudent manœuvre, and thanks to the sheltering shade, they might hope to be passed by unperceived. After a minute's waiting, not exempt from anxiety, a shrill voice reached their ears.

"We have not long to wait now," observed the speaker, "the appointment was for six; and Saint-Senier will be as punctual as the silly soldier he is. Let us stay here; it is a good spot for repose and you must be in need of some."

"Yes, I even fear I have rather over tired my hand," replied a graver voice.

"I told you to let me do the digging alone; but you never will listen to me."

This conversation took place on the other side of the stack of wood, so close that the speakers and the eavesdroppers were separated by only three or four yards. The latter could not make off without revealing their presence, and, moreover, the Hercules wished very much not to miss the confidences the two mysterious men were no doubt about to exchange. So he remained motionless and attentive, whilst the less inquisitive clown softly stretched himself upon the damp sward.

"I cannot tell why, but I never felt queerer," resumed the grave voice.

"This wet weather has upset my nerves, to say nothing of Blanche's being all wrong these two days and picking a quarrel with me last night."

"Smoke a cigarette and leave women alone, if you want to become a political celebrity," said the other stranger curtly.

This wise advice was not relished by his companion, who laughingly retorted: "Friend Taupier, you are a fool, contrary to the general rule, for humpbacks are supposed to be witty."

"Thank you," snarled the person thus commented upon.

"Don't thank me, but answer me. If I were to give up the fair sex—what would avail money and fame, for these are, I believe, according to you, the attributes of a political man?"

"I gave them up long ago!"

"Are you quite sure? It is said that you are smitten with the lovely Renée, my adversary's sister. People were even saying the other day at Brébant's that you were seen at mass at the Madelcine, and that you waited at the door to offer her some holy water."

"It's not true; it's my enemies of the Black Cow Club that spread these rumours in order to injure my candidature."

"Don't get ruffled, my fiery Taupier, I withdraw the holy water, and what is more, I will insert a correction on the fourth page of the journal."

"Very well, but I do not want so much. Confine yourself to aiming straight and ridding me of this Saint-Senier who is more than I can put up with any longer."

This reply was followed by a pause which gave the strong man an opportunity of reflecting on the conversation of which he had not lost a word. He was deeply disappointed, for nothing he had overheard had served to enlighten him. The secret which he had reckoned on surprising still escaped him, and all his preconceptions were confounded by this talk of love and duelling. Yet he resolved to listen on to the end, still hoping that some phrase would put him on a fruitful track.

"I believe I shall miss him and he will kill me," resumed the deep-voiced man, slowly. "Why did you agree to pistols?"

"Because you are at least a good second-rate shot, whereas, when fighting with swords, you have always stupidly allowed yourself to be spitted."

"My father died of a bullet, and it's my presentiment that I shall end in the same way."

"Your father was shot on a barricade, and barricades are things of the past, now that we are under a republic."

"Who knows? we were under a republic on the 24th of February, 1848, and yet that's the very day when he was shot in the back at the entrance of the Rue du Faubourg du Temple."

"What a queer idea to bring that up now," said Taupier with marked hesitation. "Do calm yourself, Valnoir. I hear steps among the leaves yonder; it's probably Saint-Senier arriving with his seconds."

"On foot?"

"You know they were going to sleep at Maisons, which is quite near here."

"True, I forgot that. Who fires first?"

"He, of course; your article was stiff enough to make him the offended party."

"Then I am a dead man," said he who was called Valnoir.

"I'll see about that," muttered Taupier between his teeth, but not so low that the ever attentive Hercules did not overhear him.

III.

DAY had dawned, sad and wan. The storm had subsided, the rain had ceased, and the now motionless trees were silently letting their tears drip on to the heather. In the distance could be heard the tread of the new-comers, who were not long in showing themselves at the other end of the clearing.

Preferring philosophic contemplation to the unexpected spectacle procured him by chance, Alcindor had settled down cosily upon the broad of his back, and appeared occupied solely in following the progress of aurora gradually lighting up the grey sky. But his master, deeply engrossed in what he had heard and in what he hoped to see, had managed to discover a gap in the wooden pile through which, invisible from the other side, he could follow all the details of the scene which was being exacted without fear of being observed. Thus hidden, our strong man greatly resembled a bandit on the look-out for travellers at the corner of a wood ; but his sole arms consisted in a keen sight and sharp ears, of which he intended to make good use. He fully understood, moreover, that he required all his mental and physical faculties to penetrate a mystery which was becoming more and more enveloped, and his wits were as long drawn at the moment as his features.

From his look-out hole he could only see the backs of the two first strangers, whilst the new-comers faced him. They were three in number : a very young officer whose uniform was half hidden by an ample fur overcoat, and two older men, whose military bearing seemed slightly hampered by their civilian attire. The taller one wore the red ribbon of the Legion of Honour at his button-hole, and his fair mutton-chop whiskers sufficiently well denoted to which branch of the service he belonged ; none but a naval officer could unite these three conditions—the absence of beard and moustaches, the decoration and the stiff demeanour arising from the habit of ordering men about. The other, with his close cropped hair and pointed beard, resembled one of the body guards of Henri III, who were called the Forty-five. His brown complexion and lively movements betokened his southern extraction. He carried a flat, oblong pistol-case under his arm.

The new arrivals joined the pair who were seemingly awaiting them, about the centre of the clearing. They bowed to one another with the stern politeness usual under such circumstances ; then the naval officer and the young man who had held the lantern, stepped aside a few paces in opposite directions. They were evidently the adversaries. To confer together, the three others approached the nook where Alcindor and his employer were concealed. The man with the pistol-case appeared to take the direction of affairs, and he began by introducing the two seconds to each other.

“ M. Pierre Taupier, author ; M. Roger de Saint-Scnier, lieutenant in the Garde Mobile,” said he with a volubility not perhaps exempt from embarrassment.

The young officer bowed coldly, without uttering a word, but Valnoir’s deformed acolyte hastened to speak.

“ Is the gentleman Commandant de Saint-Scnier’s brother ? ” he inquired with an astonished look.

“ His cousin-german, and he comes here more as a relative, since Valnoir

had not time to secure the services of another second," responded the southerner.

"Very well, my dear Podensac," resumed Taupier, plainly seeking to assume a dignified demeanour, to which his ridiculous appearance did not very well lend itself; "therefore it is with you alone, that I have to settle the conditions of the combat, and—"

"They are all settled," interrupted the bearer of the very Gascon name of PODEUSAC, and who also thought it seemly to put on a solemn air. "As the offended party, which M. Charles de Valnoir has himself acknowledged, Commandant Louis de Saint-Senier is entitled to all the advantages of the combat. As you are aware, he has chosen pistols, and has the right to fire first. They will stand at twenty-five paces, and are to fire at a given signal; and, after three shots interchanged without result, the affair will be considered at an end. That is so, is it not?"

Both the other seconds nodded together.

"As for any amicable arrangement being come to," continued the verbose Podensac, "I fear, seeing the gravity of the case, that it is useless to hope for—"

"Perfectly so, sir," put in the young officer, rather curtly. "My relative is much obliged to you for having kindly consented to accompany him on the ground, as a former brother-in-arms, but his formal desire is that there shall be no attempt made at conciliation."

"So I thought, lieutenant, and nothing further need be said."

"Moreover I am bound to notify you, gentlemen," proceeded the young man, with more animation, "that if this meeting should turn out fatal to my kinsman, I intend to demand satisfaction from M. de Valnoir on my own account. He has insulted a person bearing my name, and the commandant is not the only injured party."

"Allow me, allow me!" cried Taupier; "there can be only one meeting for the same article, and, besides, it is contrary to the laws of duelling."

"In any case, that's a point for future discussion," said Podensac, who seemed in a hurry to have done. "While we are loading the pistols, will you be so kind, sir, as to count the paces?" he added to the officer.

The latter bowed and went over to his relative, who had remained with folded arms, his back against the tree at the root of which he little dreamt that his antagonist had buried a secret. Valnoir was walking up and down by the brushwood with a rather agitated air. The two other actors in this scene of five characters, had at once entered into a private conversation, and the Hercules watched their every movement more attentively than ever. While talking they had sauntered almost up to the pile of wood, so that Alcindor himself, though he could not see them on account of his horizontal position, did not miss a single word they uttered.

"What the mischief induced you to bring this beardless officer of Mobiles?" queried Taupier. "We had enough military men in the affair without seeking this one."

"You newspaper men are all alike," returned Podensac, shrugging his shoulders. "Could I prevent the commandant choosing his cousin? Moreover, I beg you will not run down the military. You know I am almost sure to be appointed colonel of the Forlorn Hope of the Rue Maubuée; so that you owe me respect and, what is more, some notices in your catch-penny print."

"We'll see about that," said Taupier, in a very bad humour. "Open the box, that I may load the pistols."

"You! nonsense! you are capable of putting the bullets in before the powder."

Taupier's little grey eyes shot fire, and his earthy complexion assumed a greyish hue.

"Citizen Podensac," said he, in a hissing voice, "I am your superior officer and I warn you that I shall report your insolence to the Committee."

The man with the pointed beard hesitated an instant, but the hunchback's threat produced its effect, and he gave way, growling:

"All right, all right! I know about that; the civil element overrules the military one, and I am only one of the military. There are the blazers and all that is required to fill them; besides I have confidence in you, and do not believe you capable of playing any tricks. A duel is a sacred matter, look you, even when it is against a reactionary party."

Taupier squinted at him and took the open case which Podensac held out.

"Now," said he, with an equivocal smile, "go after that fine fellow who is striding along over there, and bring him to me. I want him to assist at the operation. Where are the bullets?"

"Here are six, the regulation number," answered Podensac, handing over the necessary "properties" for fighting a duel.

Dense as was the intelligence of the Hercules who was quietly hiding behind the logs, he divined, though vaguely, that the secret buried at the foot of the giant oak was not perhaps the only one out of which he would be able to make some profit. As soon as the future commander of the strange company recruited in the Rue Maubée had turned on his heels, Taupier quickly laid the case on the ground, and taking out one of the pistols, proceeded to load it. Contrary to Podensac's bantering prophecy, he put in the powder first, and followed it with a wad. At this point of his task, he cast a hasty glance around him. Valnoir was still walking at the edge of the undergrowth. The officer of Mobiles had just finished counting the paces, and had gone over to his cousin under the oak, to press his hand. Podensac was about to accost them.

At this juncture, the humpback, who was ostensibly holding a bullet between his thumb and finger, flung it over the heap of wood, and with a dexterity that would have done honour to a professor of sleight of hand, substituted in its place a round object which he rammed home with much flourish of the rod. After this, he laid the weapon on the turf and took up the other one. By a singular hazard, the bullet he threw away hit Alcindor, who uttered a groan which was promptly repressed by an energetic shake of his master's fist. Taupier would very likely have overheard the suppressed exclamation, but his attention was elsewhere. The group of combatants and seconds was coming his way and he was watching them out of the corner of his eye.

"It is done, gentlemen," he said completing his load. "Will you please examine the weapons?" he added, addressing the officer.

Instead of answering, the latter tried the hammers, measured the height of the loads with the ramrod and, finding them to agree, returned the pistols to Taupier after having capped them himself. There was a moment of embarrassing silence. The humpback lowered his eyes and held the weapons crossed in his right hand which was visibly trembling; he seemed to shrink from offering to these two men the instruments upon which their lives depended. But he suddenly raised his head as if he had made up his mind, and said abruptly

"Take your choice, gentlemen."

Valnoir bowed politely and let his adversary take precedence ; the latter laid his hand on the pistol nearest to him, without looking.

"Ha !" muttered the showman who had followed all the details of the scene, "that's an old trick. A card sharper couldn't have done it better !"

IV.

STILL reclining on his back, Alcindor had seen nothing of the proceedings that so deeply interested his employer, and he continued to twiddle his thumbs as he studied the celestial vault. His beaming physiognomy merely expressed the physical gratification of a man resting after painful labour, and his master heeded him no more than if he had been a dog whom he had taken with him when out shooting. But a keener observer would have concluded from the clown's nervous twitches that his contemplative indifference was more apparent than real. But the bearded athlete was too well persuaded of his own superiority to be mistrustful of his subaltern's hearing faculties, and, moreover, his attention was absorbed by the scene that was being enacted. It is true that this was worth all the attention he could bestow, and chance offered the mountebank an emotion which many would have paid dearly for. Modern civilisation has so affected dwelling that, three times out of four, it merely consists in an early morning's outing followed by a jolly banquet. Moreover, to fully appreciate a performance, one must not be one of the company, and the seconds, who are usually the only witnesses, have their own parts to fulfil.

Perfectly indifferent to the lives about to be risked before his eyes, the Hercules was therefore enjoying a rare privilege, for the meeting was a serious one, and, moreover, he still preserved the liberty of mind necessary to profit by the secrets he believed he had surprised. The sequel was at hand, for the two principals took their places. The naval officer, leaning on his cousin's arm, gave him his last instructions with perfect tranquillity. On his side, Valnoir, escorted by his faithful Taupier, was gesticulating freely at his post. His jerky movements contrasted strongly with M. de Saint-Senier's calm bearing, and it was not difficult to divine that he had to make painful efforts to preserve a proper attitude. Podensac had not quitted the middle of the clearing, where he was getting ready to play a leading part. By the way he held up his head and twirled his moustaches, any one could tell the former regimental fencing-master convinced of the importance of his position.

The places had been chosen alongside the undergrowth, and it would have been difficult to find a more suitable spot for two men to kill one another according to the code of honour. The ground was even and the brushwood, cut down to a uniform height, offered no guiding mark. The logs piled up on one side of the clearing, closed the whole in. Even the old oak, left standing by itself in the centre of the clearing, seemed placed there to shelter the judges of the combat ; and they had evidently all three understood it thus, for they had gathered there and were conversing together with suppressed animation. With this disposal of the various characters, the Hercules, kneeling at his peephole, found himself facing the seconds. Hardly fifteen paces to his left was M. de Saint-Senier, and Valnoir was a little nearer to his right. The latter was now immovable and erect, and his pallor was all the more apparent in his black suit.

There was something constrained about his firm-set features, and his entire person showed an indefinable stiffness which betrayed a strong will in contest with the nerves. As for the naval officer, he was carefully buttoning up his coat which he had opened to enable him to take out a packet of letters he wished to hand to his cousin. To see his coolness, almost amounting to indifference, one might have deemed him a mere looker-on.

"Governor, are they going to shoot now?" inquired Alcindor in a low tone, without altering his position.

"Holloa! it looks as if you had been listening," muttered the other rather startled. "Well, it's my opinion you had better keep on playing dummy."

"Oh, don't you fret, governor. I am only interested from an acoustical point of view. Sound travels at the rate of about four hundred yards a second, and I wanted to calculate—"

The statement of the problem which the clown was proposing to resolve was cut short by Podensac's sonorous voice. The future colonel had left the group and was asking the two principals the usual question:

"Are you ready, gentlemen?"

They nodded assent.

"At the third clap of my hands," went on Podensac, "M. de Saint-Senier will fire first, and M. de Valnoir will return his fire immediately after."

A few seconds of solemn silence ensued. Little accessible as he was to emotions, the Samson, without ceasing to stare with all his might, was rapidly stroking his thick beard with his fingers, a certain token with him of profound preoccupation. The clear warble of a green-finch awakening in the boughs, was interrupted by Podensac's signal. The naval officer's pistol went off at the same time as the last clap of the hands.

"Missed!" muttered the Hercules under his breath.

Indeed, Valnoir had slightly winced, but had kept his position, his side presented to his adversary, and his chest covered by his right arm and pistol.

"That's queer!" mumbled Alcindor, "I never heard the bullet whistle by; how can I calculate the displacement of the air?"

After his shot, M. de Saint-Senier had barely stirred, and disdaining to shield himself with his weapon, he looked steadily at his adversary who was taking aim. Almost instantly, the latter fired with a haste that proved his coolness to be forced.

"I heard the whizz this time," said the clown, "and the square of the distances—"

"By Jove! he's killed!" exclaimed the Hercules, forgetting he might be overheard; but the cry was lost amidst the excitement which followed the second shot.

Saint-Senier had fallen face foremost, and with open arms, upon the ground. The seconds ran to him at the same time, whilst the victor flung down his pistol with a gesture of regret too spontaneous not to be genuine.

"Killed outright; the bullet went in above the fifth rib," remarked Podensac in Taupier's ear.

"Roger, speak to me!" cried the officer of Mobiles, squeezing the hand of his unfortunate cousin, whose death was only too certain.

The staring eyes and bloodless face indicated plainly that the wound was in the heart or thereabouts. The blood scarcely flowed from the tiny hole that pierced the coat just over the breast; the wound had no doubt bled inwardly, and death had been instantaneous.

"He did not suffer, and many a soldier would covet such a death," resumed Podensac, who could find no other consolation to offer to a sorrowing relative.

But the young officer did not appear to hear him. He had thrown himself on his knees beside the dead man, and eyeing him bewilderingly, he repeated under his breath a woman's name :

"Renée !"

After the few moments given to the somewhat forced expression of formal grief, Taupier deemed it meet to leave the two and go and join his friend. The latter, seemingly much perturbed by the result of the meeting, had sat down with his back to the dead man, holding his head between his hands.

Chained by emotion to his hiding-place, the showman had not stirred. The tragic event at which he had assisted had deeply moved the coarse fibres of his intelligence and excited a complex action among his dull wits. He believed himself to be mixed up in a double mystery, which he could turn to account without the least scruple, and he clearly comprehended that he would lose the most important clue if he let the actors in the drama go away without seeing him. And yet he was not eager to mix himself up in an affair which had occasioned a man's death. At any moment gendarmes or forest-rangers might appear upon the scene, and from instinct as much as by profession, the itinerant showman feared contact with the representatives of the law. The wiser course was to retrace his steps to the van, and then return to this spot a little later on. It was, though, extremely difficult to get away without being seen, and yet it was even worse to be caught spying.

More than ever undecided after all his reflections, the mountebank feverishly stroked his beard, and in his perplexity consulted with a look that inferior to whom he commonly did not refer. Alcindor had not shifted his position, and seemed wrapped up in profound calculations, for his eyes were half closed while his lips mumbled figures. His impatient master was about to give him a kick to rouse him from his studies when the clown suddenly jumped up as if worked by a spring, and exclaimed :

"Régine !"

V.

THE natural effect of this movement, which Alcindor had doubtlessly not thought of, was that his long body suddenly towered above the pile of wood, and his frightened head was presented to the startled view of the persons in the clearing. The exclamation he had uttered at the same time would have been enough by itself to attract their attention, and all eyes turned towards him. A strange creature showed herself only a few paces from the group surrounding the death-stricken Saint-Senier—so strange that it was hard to tell at first sight to which sex belonged the fantastic being in a scarlet gown which stood out from against the green underwood. The countenance was as odd as the apparel. A head crowned with black hair, gilded by a tropical sun and lit up by glittering eyes, surmounted a long neck laden with strings of coral. The frail, supple body undulated beneath a scarlet frock which almost reached the tiny feet encased in high-heeled green slippers. Glass-bead bracelets decked the arms, which were otherwise bare to the elbows, and scarcely concealed

their slenderness. This phantom, which would not have been out of place in any pantomime, walked so lightly that it had crossed the roadway and reached the skirt of the wood without making the slightest sound.

Alcindor had been drawn from his mathematical broodings by that instinct which warns us of the presence of somebody unseen, for he had scarcely heard the rustling of the silk amidst the briars. But no doubt he knew all about this quaint apparition, for he did his utmost to wave it back. On his part, his master had decided to rise also, though much against his wish, and he emerged from his hiding-place pale with rage and surprise. The consequence was that the participators in the duel beheld the three inexplicable personages advancing towards them. Podensac who, as a Southerner, held uncertainty in horror, marched straight up to the intruders and was about to roughly challenge them, when the strong man deemed it prudent to avert the questioning by himself opening fire.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said he, bringing his hand to his forehead and scraping with his right leg, after the manner of mountebanks, "I am a theatrical artiste and my name is Antoine Pilevert, at your service."

"What's that to us?" interposed Taupier, approaching and evidently annoyed at the intrusion. "Instead of telling us your name, you had better explain your business here."

"Lost in the forest, with my pupils, I was attracted by the reports of firearms; but I know what an affair of honour is, and my profession has taught me to be discreet, so that you may rely on—"

"Your silence," cried Podensac. "I should think so, indeed! But that is not what we stand in need of just now. Have you some sort of conveyance at hand?"

"A six-wheeled carriage, my officer," the Hercules hastened to reply, scenting a grade under the civilian dress of the colonel of the Rue Maubuee Forlorn-Hope.

"Good! then will you help us carry a—wounded—gentleman to Saint-Germain?"

"Wounded or dead, anything you like, general," said Pilevert, more and more respectfully.

During this colloquy Taupier had not ceased scanning the new-comers suspiciously.

"Is it this clown and this witch whom you call your pupils?" he demanded abruptly.

The disdainful tone pricked Alcindor to the quick, and he came forward with one immense stride and said solemnly:

"I am indeed the pupil of Master Antoine Pilevert, famous as the Rampart of Avallon, sword-stick instructor to the Gymnasium of Saint-Gaudens, and professor of legerdemain by letters patent to the Grand Council of the Republic of Andorra; but I have followed other curriculums than his."

Little affected no doubt by this parade of titles, Taupier merely shrugged his shoulders, which, through his deformity, set his whole frame vibrating most grotesquely. The ever positive Podensac gave the conversation a more practical turn by saying to Pilevert:

"There are honest folk in all stations of life, and I have confidence in you—" at which the showman bowed. "The case stands thus: one of our friends has been badly wounded in a duel—"

"*Facies hippocratic*, *decubitus dorsal*, rigidity of the thoracic limbs—dead by a heart wound—*vide* Bichat," murmured the incorrigible Alcindor.

"Silence in the ranks!" thundered the colonel to be. "We came over from Maisons, and too much time would be lost in hunting up a conveyance. Can you lend us your vehicle?"

"With honour and pleasure, as I have already said, general," responded Pilevert. "Only let me recommend that no time be wasted, for the Prussians are coming up in hot haste and it would be a pity if we were all netted."

"The Prussians?" ejaculated Taupier. "You are drivelling, old chap. They are no doubt at the present moment somewhere in the neighbourhood of Rheims."

"Maybe they are, but I know that Uhlaus were seen close to Pontoise yesterday. Ask my pupil, if you won't believe me."

Thus interpellated, Alcudor did not miss so fine an opportunity to show off his knowledge.

"It may be," he said gravely, "that the main body of the Teutonic army is still delayed in the Catalaunatic Fields; but, we learnt of the arrival of the light brigade yesterday, at Poissy, where we lodged at the Sturgeon Inn, *Acipenser Fluvialilis*."

This reply, wherein Master Pilevert's pupil revealed himself in a single phrase as a strategist, naturalist and Latinist, appeared to impress Podensac, who, however, was nothing of the sort himself.

"The more reason then for us to be off at double quick march," said he hastily. "Is your horse fit to take us over to Saint-Germain in an hour?"

"Bradamante is not a racer, but she's a good one to go, and with all respect, I suggest that we'd better push on for Paris, whither, moreover, I am bound on business," said the Hercules with marked majesty.

"But we shall never get there!"

"We can certainly get as far as Rueil to-day, and there we shall be quite safe from the spiked helmets."

Podensac reflected and wavered. Taupier took up the solution of the question, as he was probably in a hurry to have it settled.

"You see, Valnoir has nothing further to do here," he observed to the colonel. "I shall take him off and rouse him up a bit, for though the lad has a literary turn, he has no nerve worth mentioning. Just think of him being as much affected as a child!"

"Anyone might be affected at less," said Podensac, gruffly, "and though I *soldiered* five years in Mexico, where they're not soft-hearted, the commandant's death has upset me."

"Well, it doesn't affect me," returned Taupier, pretentiously, "and I am the man to—"

"You carry your heart in your hump," exclaimed the colonel in disgust at this claim for insensibility, "and I advise you to clear off as quickly as you can. I will undertake with the lieutenant to see the body removed to Paris."

"Very well; it will be military all the way through," said Taupier, curtly. "I'm off now, and I shall expect you at the committee on Saturday. You know you need me to get the appointment. My paper is pretty widely read in the Rue Maubuée."

He spun round on his heels with all the case his awkward legs would allow.

"Cad of an ink-spiller," sneered Podensac, "I would soon send you to the deuce if I had not need of your rag."

The humpback did not catch this, or else pretended not to have heard,

and hopping along so as to dissemble his infirmity, he made his way over to his friend Valnoir, who had not stirred. In passing before the officer who was still kneeling beside his cousin's body, he raised his hat in order to conceal a nervousness which his real or affected indifference was unable to repress. But M. de Saint-Senier was too wrapped up in his sorrow to notice him.

"Then, that's settled; look sharp," said Podensac to the showman. "Go, get your van—I'll await you here. And you, the guest of the Surgeon," he proceeded, turning to Alcindor, "you had better keep watch on the road so that we may not be disturbed. As for this girl, I do not exactly know what to do with her—but she can remain here for the time being."

"She'll not be in your way, she is dumb," said Pilevert.

"So much the better, I am not fond of gabblers. Is she also deaf, eh?"

"Yes, but don't trust too much to that. She cannot hear, but she can guess. All the same she's a good sort. But, halloa! what's become of our Régine?"

The singular creature with the queenly name had moved away as soon as Taupier had joined in the conversation, as though avoiding proximity to the deformed creature, the same as good fairies shun the wicked genii. She was indeed a young girl, and her whole person showed indescribable charm, notwithstanding the quaintness of her costume and head-dress. Her irregular features expressed a kind of passionate goodness, and her large black eyes beamed with intelligence. She had gone and seated herself beside the dead man, and had taken one of his hands in hers. The young officer had not heard her light bird-like step, and he was gazing on her in astonishment.

"After all," muttered Podensac, "women are always useful in the ambulance department. Now, then, off with you, you others! I expect you back in a quarter of an hour."

Alcindor executed the colonel's orders without a murmur, but not without casting a melancholy look upon Régine. Satisfied with his morning's work and determined to see the adventure out, Pilevert quickly departed for the ravine where his ambulatory domicile had come to grief. He there found Bradamante who had managed to regain her legs. He jumped on the box, and by much laying on of the whip succeeded in extricating the lumbering vehicle from its awkward position. On reaching the Etoile-du-Chêne-Capitaine, the old jade broke into a trot of her own accord, and in less than five minutes Pilevert drove into the clearing where Podensac was awaiting him. Régine was still holding the dead man's hand, while Valnoir, leaning on Taupier's arm, was disappearing under the trees.

VI.

THREE days after the denouement of this tragedy, on a sultry September evening, the Place de la Madeleine was crowded with promenaders. The Flower Market bloomed in triple rows of roses and multicoloured heaths, and the cafés had not sufficient seats for the thirsty customers who were seeking a little fresh air under the spare trees of the boulevard. To see this noisy, lounging throng, one would never have suspected that Paris, completely invested since the night before, was going to be sealed up for five long months. The only matter recalling the situation was an intense dust thickening the air, a characteristic trait of the early days of the siege.

Long droves of sheep, frightened by the vehicles, tumultuously ascended the Boulevard Malesherbes. They were gazed upon with curiosity, whilst there were merry computations as to how many days' resistance these living provisions represented. Not a soul was sad, and far more astonishment was to be read on the countenances than uneasiness. It was the golden age of the siege.

The concourse was especially great at the fountain occupying the centre of the angle terminating the Rue Royale. The thin jets of water spattering into the basin rejoiced the middle-class citizens and the children sitting around the gay flower-bed of this miniature square. On the second floor of one of the finest houses on the side of the Place, a woman was leaning out on the balcony watching this happy picture. She wore a long white morning gown, and one hand toyed with her hair which, half loosened, hung over her shoulders. Her languid pose alone betrayed that she was bored to death, and her morning attire displayed at four in the afternoon would have told any Parisian of experience that she belonged to the fast world. This surmise would have been a correct one.

The lady was notorious from the lake in the Bois de Boulogne to the Hippodrome of Vincennes under the harmonious name of Rose de Charmière, and at the present time she was indeed dying of ennui, that boundless ennui peculiar to gay women, and which makes them quite ferocious. This unpleasant mood was vented in spasmodic yawns which she took no pains to conceal, and in a light tapping with her shapely foot which just showed itself between the ornamental iron-work of the balcony. Her indifferent glance wandered over the throng with all the scorn she believed it her duty to show for people who went about on foot. Now and then she would watch some approaching carriage in which she fancied she recognised a familiar face, but she would turn testily away on perceiving that she had honoured a hired vehicle filled with vulgar strangers with her attention. Once she deigned to give some heed to two strollers who looked up with marked persistency, but it was her last attempt at diversion. Fatigued by the monotonous spectacle of the street, or by the curiosity she inspired in the passers-by, she suddenly quitted the balcony and returned to her drawing-room, crying out :

"What a beastly herd ! Goodness, I was a fool to remain in town !"

No doubt relieved by this outburst, however trivial, the lady settled down on a broad ottoman and began swinging the tassel of her waist cord to the then new air of the "Djinns," which she hummed rather out of tune.

Rose de Charmière was a tall, and passably elegant person of incontestable beauty—if wide eyes, high brow, straight nose and a small mouth constitute beauty. On seeing her for the first time though, one would have fancied she was a previous acquaintance, so nearly did she approach the invariable model of the typical "Ladies of the Lake." She had evidently been born a brunette, and the golden tint of her tresses must have cost her more than one sitting under the hands of an expert in capillary dyes, but her complexion might do without the learned preparations used in shady society. Hers was a southern skin, without glow, but warm and smooth. Her teeth were splendid, her ears small, her foot narrow and arched ; but, assiduous cares to the contrary notwithstanding, her hands lacked style as her general appearance lacked charm. In the "Grand Army" of Parisian gallantry, which has soldiers, generals, marshals, and even its "Old Guard," Rose undoubtedly belonged to the staff. Had she obtained a precocious promotion, or was it hers by right of seniority ? This was a question

difficult to answer off-hand. Her supple figure and her liveliness offered indisputable tokens of youth, yet there was a wire-drawn expression in her lineaments which told of long service in the ranks of gallantry. It resulted from these contrasts that her age was a problem for her most intimate friends. The simpletons thought her twenty-two, the good judges twenty-five and none but the old hands, experienced by a long training, could flatly assert that Rose had passed her thirtieth year. These latter, however, never called on her, and would have been refused admission had they done so. She possessed the great advantage over her contemporaries of having spent her early years in the country or abroad, a circumstance that baffled indiscreet researches.

Madame de Charmière had come into Paris fully equipped, and had at once entered the upper ranks of the fast world without passing by the sorry stages of furnished apartments and public dancing places. This absence of awkward Parisian antecedents was a power which she used with all the resources of a mind as narrow as practical. Moreover, during the last six weeks she had been passing through a crisis, and political events, which for the first time were influencing her existence, roused all the more the redoubtable calculating faculties with which nature had endowed her. Consequently, she gave herself up to meditation as she reclined on her Smyrna tapestry, and meditation all the more serious from the fact that she had just had a long confabulation with her legal adviser. Her reflections on the inconvenience of investments at high interest were interrupted by the appearance of her maid, displaying from the other side of the discreetly raised door-hanging the face of an abigail that would have been worth a fortune to a dramatic author.

"What's up now, Faufine?" queried Rose languidly.

"Madame, it's master," was the abigail's quiet reply. These words produced a magical effect on the lady.

"Who, Gontran?" she asked, rising eagerly.

"Why, no, madame; it's M. Charles de Valnoir."

"Ah! yes, you are right!" said Rose with a smile which resembled a wry face. "I am always forgetting that that ass La Giraudière felt the necessity of running down to his country place and raising a company of free-shooters, and that Valnoir is master now."

"Would madame like me to tell him that she has a headache?" inquired the intelligent Faufine.

"No, show him in," rejoined Rose in the resigned tone of a civil servant obliged to give an audience to that bore the taxpaying public.

The tiring-maid noiselessly vanished, and the tapestry was lifted a few seconds afterwards to admit the principal actor in the duel of Saint-Germain. He was as usual correctly dressed, carefully gloved and very pale.

"Good day, my love," he said in an easy manner belied by the quaver in his voice.

"It's you, Charles, is it?" queried Madame de Charmière carelessly, who had had time to assume a graceful pose on the divan. "I did not expect you till seven."

"Indeed, that is the fashionable hour," responded Valnoir tartly, "and I have acted like a cad in coming too soon."

In the momentary silence that followed, Rose tranquilly lighted a cigarette.

"My dear fellow," said she after a calculated pause, "you have become positively unbearable these last three days. Your ill-humour is in precious

queer taste and very unfair besides, for I sacrificed for you a very remunerative connection. I must tell you that the state of siege does not appear to me a sufficient excuse for your jealous fits."

"The sacrifice you allude to was not voluntary," replied Valnoir bluntly, "and if M. de La Giraudière had not gone—"

"If Gontran had not gone," interrupted Rose, "he would try to enliven me instead of kicking up ridiculous rows. Because you have fought a duel, that is no reason for putting on tragic airs."

"You forget it was my misfortune to kill a man," said Valnoir with repressed fury.

"My dear fellow, I thought better of you," sneered Madame de Charmière. "When a man comes of a noble stock, as you make out you do, he treats a duel as a matter of no moment, and leaves such emotions as you are displaying to collegians. Let us talk about business—I like that better."

"Be it so," answered the young man, making an effort over himself. "The 'Serpenteau' has appeared, and we had a circulation of ten thousand on the second day."

"What is the 'Serpenteau'?" inquired Rose, watching the blue spirals of smoke of the Maryland tobacco.

"A newspaper I have been starting, as I have already told you twenty times," said Valnoir, sharply.

"Very good! what do you mean by a circulation of ten thousand? Is it ten thousand francs that you are going to bring me on a silver salver as your friends will offer the keys of Paris to the King of Prussia one of these days?"

Valnoir made no reply, but angrily put his hat on his head and went to lean out over the balcony.

"You feel the heat, my pet," said Rose soothingly. "You are quite right, though: it is stifling here and I'll keep you company," she added, proceeding to the window overlooking the Place.

Her lover seemed absorbed by the contemplation of the front of the Madeleine, but he had become still more pale.

"At what are you staring so there?" she demanded.

A lady in mourning was slowly ascending the church steps, and Valnoir was watching her eagerly.

"Ha, ha, I understand," jeered Rose, who had fortified her vision with some opera-glasses; "all you came here for was to see the lovely Renée de Saint-Senier go to evening service."

"Go in! go in at once!" cried Valnoir, gripping her arm with unheard-of violence.

VII.

INSTINCTIVELY opposed to quarrelling in public, Rose let herself be torn away from the balcony without resistance; but she took care not to lose the advantage given her by Valnoir's roughness. In the circle to which she belonged, a lover is an enemy, and, though never the subject of a technical treatise, its strategy is none the less a science as practical as perilous. In this incessant warfare, the phlegmatic always triumph in the end, and the editor of the "Serpenteau" was far from being one of these. Rose knew this well, and often laid traps for her adorer's impulsive

nature. Sometimes the quarrel she picked had a serious end ; more often the dispute was brought about to make a rule manifest which was only too real. In these cases she worked for art's sake, as painters say ; and such was the case on this evening. At heart she little recked whether her idolator looked or not at Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, and she only opened fire on principles.

"It's disgraceful," she said with all the more emphasis as Valnoir had not really hurt her. "I might have known you were nothing but a rough."

After uttering these withering words she dropped upon the divan, with an abrupt movement not devoid of coquetry. Rose excelled in the art of storming, without making herself ugly, and succeeded particularly in domestic jars. The shot had told, and the hapless Valnoir, wounded in the secret fibres of his pride and passion, vainly sought to recover from the shock.

"You are heartless," he muttered sillily, as he sank into an arm-chair.

The fascination must have been potent for a journalist, cured of all youthful illusions by his profession, to be caught by such acting, but Madame de Charmière had found in Cîree's school the secret that changed Ulysses's companions into brute beasts.

"Heartless !" she repeated, sobbing with first-class talent, "heartless, eh ? a woman who has resigned herself to the dangers and privations of a siege to remain with a man who loves another ! Ah, what you have just done has hurt me deeply. To use my windows to watch your mistress go by—it is dastardly !"

Valnoir turned pale, and rose to rush out of this lair, tapestried in silk. The scene in the forest appeared before his eyes like a flash, and he felt all the disgrace there was in letting his victim's sister be insulted in his presence. But Rose had released her splendid fair hair by an irresistible shake of the head, and the philter was already taking effect. The slave had resumed his chain before he had had time to rejoice in his freedom.

"You know very well that I have never spoken to Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier," he said with a lingering touch of anger, "and besides—"

"What matters that ? a man may love at a distance," interrupted Madame de Charmière. "I was soft enough to become infatuated with you on the first night of one of your pieces—Lord knows what a poor thing it was, too !"

This cunning change in the scale brought the wrangle into a more even key, and Rose had her reasons for so doing. Truth to tell, her relations with the gentleman of the press were merely the result of a series of very complicated financial combinations, and the lady, who had half crossed the Rubicon in letting herself be willingly locked up in Paris, sought to clear up the situation before trusting wholly to the bark bearing Valnoir and his fortune.

"Look here, Rose," said the author, suddenly relaxing, "this is really no fit time for picking a crow with me."

"I should think it was fit when the German canaries are at our gates," interrupted Madame de Charmière, laughing. "You are quite funny now—that's a good sign !"

Subjugated by this witticism, which he would have found idiotic at any other time, Valnoir was weak enough to smile as well. Rose at once called out her reserves, which consisted in playing with her high-heeled shoe, and her well-shaped foot had not thrice quitted its black satin prison before the lover, renouncing all his indignation, was on his knees before his idol. At

this very moment Madame de Charmière was asking herself if she ought not to sell her certificates of the last Loan and purchase some *Crédit Foncier* stock, and she was mentally computing what a "circulation of ten thousand" would bring. Figures had the knack of at once fixing themselves upon her mind, and those the journalist had mentioned had particularly struck her. But it was awkward to change from a scene of jealousy to one of finance, and Rose judged wisely that it was time to have recourse to tears, a means having the immense advantage of cutting recriminations short. So she burst into sobs as she well knew how to, without spoiling her face or hiccoughing ridiculously. This heavy discharge produced a decisive effect on the already wavering Valnoir.

"Rose, what ails you, my white Rose?" he asked in a moved voice, "and what must I do to make you happy?"

"Nothing, Charles, nothing," replied the charming woman, distractedly stroking her lover's hair.

"Listen," went on Valnoir, carried away on his amorous chimera, "I know all that you have done for me, and I want you never to regret it. Stay! I have not told you all—I wished to give you a surprise. These rooms furnished by another displease me. I have found a delightful villa out at Auteuil, and—I believe I shall soon be able to purchase it and furnish it for you."

"You are mad, my Charles!" said Rose, still among the rain clouds, but coming down nearer earth; "do you believe that I would be a burden on the future of a man of talent who has to live by his pen?"

"The pen may become a golden one, my Rosalind," said Valnoir, pricked in the quick; "before a month the 'Serpenteau' will bring in five hundred francs a day."

"Indeed?" asked Madame de Charmière with marvellously well assumed admiration.

"Yes, my darling; only Taupier asserts that our politics must be more clearly defined, and I do not possess the democratic keynote like him."

"Your friend is right," said Rose, gravely, after a pause employed in artfully wiping her perfectly dry eyes; "you ought to defend the people."

"I did not know you held such advanced opinions," said Valnoir laughing.

"I?" responded the adventuress, having had time to compose an impassioned face. "Do you not know that I have suffered more than any girl of the lower classes—I, who was born noble but poor. The first of our line was killed in Palestine, and—"

Valnoir raised his head to hear the rest; but Rose prudently stopped short. Gathered from the comic opera of "*Geneviève de Brabant*," her historical knowledge was not extensive enough to allow her to cite dates.

"Why do you not let me make inquiries about this family of yours?" asked Valnoir after a pause.

"What's the use?" sighed Madame de Charmière. "My ruined father died in exile, and the only brother left to me is in the Spanish army. Title deeds without estate are not worth showing, and I shall keep mine back until you are a rich man."

Touched to the heart, the dupe was about to answer effusively when the rustle of silk made him turn his head. The waiting-maid's cunning face appeared framed amid the folds of the heavy door-hangings.

"Someone is asking for madame," she said in the discreet tone of voice acquired in the anterooms of the gay world.

"Who is it?" sharply questioned Rose, greatly annoyed by the incident.

Faufine responded by a shake of the head, equivalent to "I do not know."

"Learn the gentleman's name," said the mistress, comprehending by her maid's manner that the visitor was masculine. Struck by the same idea, Valnoir had risen and was pacing the room in vexation.

"He is not a gentleman, but a man," answered the girl, suppressing a strong inclination to laugh.

"What do you mean by a man? a tradesman?"

"No, madame, a man I have never set eyes on before, and a droll character, too, ha, ha!"

"Faufine, my girl," said Rose drily, "I am not fond of riddles, and I am in no mood for joking."

"Madame will please excuse me, but if she had seen the fellow she would laugh more than I do."

"Seen whom?" queried the lady out of patience.

"A tall scarecrow with tow hair, and who speaks Latin."

"You are crazy! it's some beggar, and you know I am not partial to those people. Send him off about his business."

"Oh, no, madame, he did not ask for money; in fact he offered me a franc to announce him—as if I would do such a thing for twenty sous—"

"So you know his name, then. Speak quick and let us have done."

"He did not give his name, madame, but he said he came on behalf of one M. Antoine Pilevert."

The name overwhelmed Madame de Charmière like a thunderbolt.

"Pilevert," she echoed, pale and trembling. "It cannot be!"

VIII.

"THAT'S the name he gave me," said the maid, trying to look stupid and respectful at the same time.

"But this—this Pilevert is not there, is he?" asked the lady with almost fearful hesitation.

"No, madame, he has sent his groom, that's all; a groom in the most comical livery," replied Faufine, recovering her coolness in direct ratio to the agitation observable in her mistress.

It would have been hard, indeed, not to perceive the effect produced on the descendant of the Crusaders by the very vulgar name pronounced by the tirewoman. After Godefroy de Bouillon, Pilevert was rather out of place, and Valnoir himself felt his enthusiasm dashed as by cold water. When a man cherishes a flame in this byway of society, he is never safe against being brought sharply back to the realities by the announcement of some prosaic visitor, and Valnoir's jealousy already perceived in this incident the entrance upon the scene of some rival bolstered up by millions gained in a patent pill or a new candle. This vexation naturally found vent in a blunder.

"If I am in your way, dear, pray let me take my leave," he said in the voice of honey and vinegar, which Rose in her experience of lovers' stratagems could not mistake.

Under other circumstances she would have answered in a similar strain;

but the news brought by her maid seemed to have power to curb the imperious spirit of the proud Madame de Charmière.

"You are mistaken, my love," she said, giving the speaker her hand. "This ludicrous name reminds me of most mournful events which I may relate to you some day. I must see this man. Remain, and wait for me in my dressing-room."

She put so much feeling into her voice that the "Lion in Love" was soon tamed. He even had a scruple of generosity and did not wish to fall short in showing his confidence.

"I will go and have a smoke in the Champs Elysées," he said, taking his hat, "and will look in again at seven o'clock."

"No, Charles, I beseech you," murmured Rose in his ear. "Do not go out. I may have need of you."

And without awaiting a reply, she opened her dressing-room door and installed Valnoir on one of the little couches of the elegant snuggery. As soon as she had imprisoned her lover in this conveniently near-at-hand post, where he could hear nothing, however, thanks to the thickness of the hangings, Madame de Charmière hastened, through an excess of caution, to shoot the bolt. This ingenious act freed her from an inconvenient witness, whilst allowing her to call him to her aid in case of need. These preliminaries had given her time to recover all her calmness, and it was with a countenance as cold as a Polar winter that she bade Faufine, "Show that fellow in."

From her tenderest childhood, Rose had contracted the useful habit of suiting her attitude to any plan she had in her head, and she always had one or another. Her speech, gesture and bearing always accorded at will with the idea of the moment. Her main strength ever lay in this, and more than once she regretted not having turned her marvellous acting ability to account on the stage. But the theatre, as she herself said, would have taken up too much of her time. To receive the stranger, she sat in a low easy chair, with her back to the window. To have an adversary dazed with the light in his eyes, was one of Rose's favourite manœuvres, accustomed as she was to consider love or business colloquies as duels. The door opened, but *nobody* appeared; we mean this literally, for all the lady saw were the legs of some person whose upper part was veiled in the drapery of the portal. This introduction was comical enough to upset her studied gravity, but, in serious matters, Rose knew how to control even her risibility. Besides, the silken screen in which the new comer was muffled soon fell aside, and the tall Alcindor stalked in.

This star of the fairs had evidently sacrificed to plain civilian taste since his coming to town, inasmuch as his fancy dress worn in the Forest of Saint-Germain had suffered notable modification. His thin legs floundered about in red striped trousers, and the rest of his person disappeared in a voluminous whitish woollen overcoat of which the long hairs bristled up at war with the season. In his fingers he twirled a military fatigue cap which was not ornamented by the brass number plate adopted by the recently raised regiments; but in spite of this warlike headgear, no one would have taken him for a determined defender of his country. In one glance Rose reckoned up the social value of her caller, and without hesitation she assumed the face she wore for her tradesmen.

"What do you want with me?" she demanded, playing with a Turkish fan through the openwork of which she examined the intruder.

"I? nothing," tranquilly responded Alcindor, swaying about like a poplar in the breeze.

The lady had expected a more palpable effect, as she knew she possessed the gift of disconcerting men; hence she felt some surprise at the failure of her attack.

"Then what are you here for?" she inquired, emphasizing her scorn.

"Let us define the point, madame," returned Alcindor, laying his forefinger along his nose knowingly. "I myself wish nothing of you, but my master does."

"And who is your master?"

"M. Antoine Pilevert, as I have already stated to the young person who guards your door—in Latin, *puella*, in English, *girl*, in Spanish—"

"That will do!" exclaimed Rose, goaded out of her usual calm, by her impatience. "I once knew someone bearing the name you mention, but—"

"So, after all, the governor was right—you do know him!" interrupted the clown.

Madame de Charmière bit her lips; at the first bout she had committed a blunder and she sought a way to repair it.

"I repeat, my lad," she continued, mollifying her voice, "that you are labouring under an error, for the person in question must have died a long while back. What is this master of yours?"

"A traveller, madame," replied Alcindor grandiloquently.

"That's not a calling, unless you mean a commercial one? No? Well?" went on Rose, with a smile intended to coax the Merry Andrew into revelations which he was not eager to make.

"It is his profession, anyhow, and the best course for a lover of art to follow."

"Oh, he's an artist, then?"

"Yes, madame, a gymnastic artiste."

"Gymnastic?" echoed Rose, frowning.

"Just so; it's a word derived from the Greek."

At that moment Madame de Charmière was not thinking much of etymology. Circus programmes had familiarised her with the ambitious appellation assumed by Pilevert, and she said to herself:

"Mountebank! that's him no doubt."

It cost her some pains to hide her agitation, but she succeeded in veiling it with an air of indifference.

"There's some mistake here, decidedly, my lad, and I am sorry you had the trouble of coming," she said, rising, the shock being sufficient to make her feel the necessity for a breath of fresh air.

"Pon my word, it is very possible, after all," coincided Alcindor, backing away. "And I'll tell 'the old man'—"

"But, now I think of it, who gave you my name and address?" inquired the lady, eyeing him askant, and without leaving the window.

"Nobody, madame; M. Pilevert thought he recognised you himself, and he told me to go up to the second floor—"

"Recognise me? where did he see me?"

"There, on your balcony; he's been walking up and down in the Place this hour past."

Rose started as if a serpent had stung her, and she quickly returned into the room.

"And whom did he bid you ask for?" was her agitated question.

"Oh, it's not worth the trouble of telling you," rejoined the envoy, lifting up the door-hanging. "It is all a mistake no doubt, and your name could never be anything like it."

"Tell me all the same, my friend," persisted Rose, trying to smile.

"Well, madame, he requested me to get to speak to you alone; that's why I was so bent on coming in, and to ask you if your name was not—"

"Go on, if my name was not?" questioned Madame de Charmière with sparkling eyes.

"Catiche, madame," stammered the much daunted ambassador.

In the interval of silence that followed the lady blanched very much, and bit her fan.

"The name is rather rural," resumed Alcindor with the evident intention of excusing himself; "but it is a diminutive of Catherine, the name of a Russian empress."

"Your master is a saucy fellow," interrupted Rose, settling on what course to pursue, and I must ask you to be off and tell him that I know not Mademoiselle Catiche."

"To hear is to obey," said the clown gravely, bringing his hands to his forehead after the style of the slaves of the seraglio.

Here was about to open the door, when the noise of a violent discussion arose in the ante-chamber. Faufine's flute-like voice rose to its uppermost notes, and so overcame a deep voice that was swearing freely and repeating:

"I tell you it is her! and by heavens, I will speak to her."

IX.

THE mistress of the house had no doubt recognised the voice, so prodigal with strong language, for her emotion was so great that she had to lean for support against a buhl cabinet that was fortunately within reach. The door was almost immediately dashed open, and a man rushed into the room with all the impetuosity of a mad bull. Pilevert—there was no mistake as to his identity—quivered with rage, and his usually dull eyes were full of fire. He had just freed himself of the maid, and now with a well directed blow thrust aside poor Alcindor, who quite unintentionally barred his way. Madame de Charmière was half hidden amidst the curtains, so that he did not perceive her at first, and reached the middle of the room, vociferating:

"Ha, ha! so they won't receive me! ha, ha, do they say they don't know me? Why, I am at home here, I am!" he bellowed, at the same time belabouring the unoffending chairs.

At the height of his outburst, Rose, who promptly became mistress of herself in important crises, advanced with as much calmness as she could assume, and softly touched the arm of the Hercules.

"Oh, so you've turned up at last, eh?" he roared, with a flourish of the fist that would have made anybody else take flight.

But she did not stir, being used to taming animals either ferocious or otherwise.

"You won't assert now that I was mistaken, I hope!" thundered Pilevert, shoving his fist under her nose.

"Excuse me, sir, for keeping you waiting," said Rose blandly; "I was so far from expecting the pleasure of seeing you again in Paris that I be-

lieved there was some error when this young man mentioned your name. I thought you were in Spain."

"I've just come from there, and from farther off still," growled the Hercules, his wrath calming down.

Madame de Charmière looked him straight in the eyes as a tamer of wild beasts would a tiger, and let none of his movements escape her.

"As for my name," added the showman, "it seems to me you have good reasons not to forget it, Madame—Madame— How do you call yourself for the time being?"

Rose no doubt thought it inopportune to give a direct answer to this question, for she said to her maid, who was listening with the keenest interest to this edifying dialogue, in a sharp voice: "Leave the room and say I am not at home to anybody."

"I shall be delighted to have a long chat with you, sir," she added, addressing the showman, who was stupefied by so much coolness, "and I do not wish us to be disturbed."

"The deuce you don't!" exclaimed Pilevert. "Well, after all, that just suits me. Besides, we want no reporters for what we have to say between our noble selves. Show me your back, Master Clown, and wait for me on the Place."

"Right you are, governor," replied Alcindor, striding forth with one lingering, mournful look at the waiting-maid.

The two principal actors in this dramatic scene were now alone together. They examined one another briefly, without speaking, like wrestlers before coming to the hold. It was the lady who began the struggle.

"Take a seat, Antoine," she said in her sweetest voice, a tone which quite upset the mighty man of muscle, who had expected a very different onslaught.

"It's not worth while," he growled, trying to call back his wrath, which was oozing away gradually under the influence of Rose's soft accents; "we can very well say what we have to say standing."

Her only answer was to grasp his huge paw and force him to seat himself upon the ottoman, using blandishments which he did not try to resist. When she had placed her antagonist as she had wished, she seated herself beside him as lightly and gracefully as a bird. The investment was complete, and however robust he was, the Hercules found himself without the power to break through the lines.

"Now let us have a talk," said Rose, as calmly as if they had parted only the previous evening.

"So we will! I have been long enough hunting after you," retorted Pilevert, still essaying to be rough, but it was his last revolt.

"So have I!" sighed the dame. "Do you believe that I have not done all in the world these five long years to learn what had become of you?"

"Get along with you!" cried the Hercules doubtfully.

"Must I prove it?"

"Faith! I should not be sorry, for, in plain language, I'll be teetotally dumfounded if I should ever have suspected it."

"You left me at Bordeaux, saying you were going to Spain, did you not?"

"Quite so! I had a splendid engagement in the Levilla Circus; only when I got into Andalusia, the director had gone smash, and I was obliged to hook on to a troupe off for San Francisco."

"And you omitted to write to me! It's not that I bear you any ill-will,

but what could I do? alone, penniless, without a friend! I made inquiries of the Spanish consul, but he could not find anything about you. Would you like to see his letters?"

"Never mind," answered Pilevert, with a careless wave of the hand. "Since I have found you cock-a-hoop with fortune, I have no need any longer to follow the fairs, and that's all I ask, for I was heartily sick of slinging five hundredweights round my head in the booths."

A spasm of anger momentarily ruffled his hearer's face, but it was fleeting, and the champion heavy-weight lifter did not even perceive it.

"Indeed I hope, too, my dear brother, that you will drop that pitiful profession," she said quickly, "and you may well believe that I would not let my own flesh-and-blood perform in the street."

"Now you talk, sister!" exclaimed Pilevert, deeply affected. "I always said you were not so cruel as you look."

This mitigated eulogy was not relished by the recipient who could not help frowning.

"Then that's settled," said the mountebank. "I am to make myself at home, here. It is snug, and I can rub along better than in the caravan. Of course you can easily find a box here for me and my clown, Alcindor—"

With a hand uplifted, Rose checked his enthusiasm.

"Allow me, brother," she said, touching his shoulder; "you don't want to ruin me, do you?"

"I am not such a fool!" cried the other bluntly.

"Well, then, you must understand that my position does not allow my keeping you here."

"Why not, Katinka?" demanded the crusaders' scion's brother, in an exasperated voice.

"Because I must entertain company, and Catherine Pilevert's family would be very ill received by Madame de Charmière's friends."

"I don't care a fig for them," replied the showman, snapping his fingers, a gesture so totally lacking in stylishness that it is a wonder the noble dame was not abashed.

"Do you want plain words?" she demanded drily.

"All I came for."

"Then listen to me. I cannot house you, but I can help you, and am ready to do so on one condition."

"Out with it!" said the mistrustful brother.

"You must keep me, too."

"I? you know I haven't a copper," said the other, slapping his pockets.

"I do not need your purse, but your mind and activity."

"You may depend on them," returned the athlete, evidently flattered, "and I only want to know what's the feat to perform."

"You shall know soon enough; meanwhile I'll give you money to lodge you and clothe you, for I want to see you often; and, as you will understand, your present apparel—"

"Dash me if I did not think I looked pretty tidy," said Pilevert, glancing complacently on his large pearl-buttoned over-coat, and brass chain trouser-straps.

Rose smiled as she went over to a rosewood secretary which she opened to extract a five hundred franc note. At sight of the pale-blue paper held out to him, the Samson became quite lively.

"By jingo, Katinka, you are a sound brick!" he roared joyfully;

"and I believe we shall hit it off together. This comes in awfully handy for a spec I have in view," he added, engulfing the note in the inside breast-pocket of his coat.

"A speculation?" queried Rose, becoming attentive.

"Ay, ay, and a rich one."

"Can I help you in any way?"

Pilevert tugged away at his beard, as was his wont in thorny cases.

"As to that, why shouldn't she?" he muttered.

"Oh, if it's a secret, I sha'n't ask you," went on his sister, nonchalantly.

The man did not hasten to reply, whilst his swollen temple veins drew out like cord, a token in him of much stress of mind.

"It's just this way, my little Katinka," he finally rejoined with some embarrassment; "when I call it a spec, it's not exactly such. I believe I am on the track of one, that's all."

"On the track?" repeated the astonished Rose.

"Yes, I know a thing—something for which some parties will, perhaps, pay high, and if I only could—"

Here he reined up short, as if he feared he had said too much. His sister kept her eyes upon him. Already she had a glimpse of profit in the confidence hanging on Pilevert's lips. The point was to obtain it complete, and the first thing towards that was to reassure him.

"In fact, everything fetches money in Paris," she remarked in the most natural tone, "and secrets command a high price."

"So you believe I could make something out of it?"

"I am quite sure. It is a widely spread trade, and has a name of it's own."

"Yes; but the mischief of it is that I do not know how to come across the parties with whom I want to do biz."

"Are they in town?"

"That they are; but I haven't got their address, or rather, I've lost it."

"Look here, Antoine," said Rose good-naturedly, "I have no desire to learn your secret; but only tell me the name you want to know about."

"By chance I know the name of one M. de—" He stopped, caught by a lingering scruple.

"M. de—what?" asked Madame de Charmière, coldly.

"Well, here goes whatever the consequences," cried Pilevert. "Do you know one M. de Valnoir?"

X.

"VALNOIR! did you say Valnoir?" ejaculated Madame Charmière, suddenly losing her self command.

"Do you know him? how pat that falls!" cried Pilevert, enchanted by the discovery, and awaiting a more ample explanation than came, for his sister, possessed with anxious thoughts, gazed mechanically on the pattern of the carpet.

"Impossible," she mused. "Valnoir has not left Paris for over a year. Where could he have met him?"

"Little Katinka," resumed the athlete, "if you can give me that joker's address, you will much oblige me, and upon my word, if the game is worth anything, you shall have your share."

"You are too quick, my dear," responded Rose, "I do know somebody of that name, but he is not in France."

"It may be a relation of his."

"I hardly believe that. What is the business of the Valnoir you seek?"

"I don't rightly know, but I fancy I heard he was one of those newspaper fellows."

Rose winced nervously, but she found the strength to reply :

"I do not know any such persons, and I very much fear that your secret is not worth much. Gentlemen of the press are not wealthy."

"That may be; but I shall make this man pay up, and, anyhow, I do not need him to squeeze out the ready. Oh, if those rascally Prussians had not hunted us after we left Saint-Germain forest, the job would be pulled off; but they will not be there for ever, and I may even find some way to creep past them, and then—"

"Be careful! you will tell more than you intend," said Rose, smiling.

"I'd have you to know that I know you met M. de Valnoir at Saint-Germain."

The old trick again succeeded which consists in asserting what is not known in order to learn it.

"Oh, I am not keeping that back—it was there I was his second only three days back," said Pilevert.

He had let out quite enough for Madame de Charmière to guess at least part of the truth. Clearly the secret was connected with her lover's trip to Saint-Germain, of which she knew the sad result though not the details. She could not believe that the gentleman had had a mountebank for a second, and she knew the latter quite capable of lying, but she felt there was a mystery. Whatever her desire to clear it up, she understood that too much pressure would fail, and so she chose a middle course. Besides, she deemed it urgent to abridge the interview. Valnoir was likely to find time long in the dressing-room, and the vicinity was fraught with danger.

"My dear brother," she said, "I am going to give you the address of a gentleman who will advise you much better than I. Go on my behalf to M. Frapillon, 97 Rue Cadet. He is in every day up to twelve o'clock noon. Unfold your tale to him. He is very keen, and will certainly find out what you want to know. And he will tell me all you say to him," added the prudent Rose, mentally.

"Yes, but what's his fee for all this!" inquired Pilevert, not naturally prodigal.

"Nothing. I pay him by the year to look after my business, and he will attend to yours into the bargain. Now, my dear Antoine, we must part. Return to see me when you have lodgings and new clothes. I shall need you, and if your search does not succeed, I have another matter to propose to you."

Pilevert would have willingly prolonged the interview, for he felt very comfortable on the divan, and he had a host of questions to put to his sister; but the five hundred franc note made him nowise touchy about how he was dealt with.

"Right you are, Katinka," he said; "I am keeping Alcindor waiting, and then again, it's my regular time for my bitters, and that's a sacred hour! Before we part, though, one brotherly embrace!"

Madame de Charmière would have willingly dispensed with this token of fraternal affection, but to curtail the farewell she resigned herself to offering her forehead. She was still waiting with closed eyes when a slight sc and

made her lift her head. Antoine had no time to give the kiss, as his sister bounded away like a tiger. A man was just entering and approaching the ottoman with an oblique, queer walk.

"Faufine!" screamed Madame de Charmière irritatedly, "I thought I told you I was not at home to anybody?"

"Except for me, for I am asked to dinner," apologized the new-comer.

"I forgot it, Monsieur—Monsieur Taupier, I think?" said Rose, in a tone that would have sent anybody but a humpback journalist flying.

"Not me," returned the cynical character, "for Valnoir told me you gave very good dinners."

The name Taupier uttered produced the effect of a bugle blast among sleepers. In her first angry impulse, Rose had not considered all its possible consequences, and the danger appeared. On his part, the Hercules pricked up his ears and rose, more in curiosity than in politeness.

"Ha! the man we met in the Forest of Saint-Germain!" exclaimed the humpback, instantly recognising him.

The astonishment was mutual. Pilevert could not believe his eyes, which he opened immoderately, and let wander to and from Rose and Taupier, as if he hoped to discover the bond linking two persons whose relations he had never suspected. He began to understand furthermore that his sister had deceived him, and he prepared to pay her out for her falsehoods. But it was precisely in dangerous scrapes that Madame de Charmière's clear and practical wits most brightly shone. She knew how to choose a line of action without delay and march straight upon the foe.

"Since you are acquaintances," she said tranquilly to Taupier, "I need not introduce this gentleman who brings me news of my brother."

Whilst speaking, she enjoined silence on the athlete with an imperious look.

"The gentleman comes from Spain," proceeded Rose, without ceasing to keep the strong man under her cold, clear, steel-like glance.

"Oh, does he?" said Taupier. "He must have come round by way of Normandy then, for he came from Poissy when we met that day in the forest."

"Suppose I did?" sneered the strong man, "don't all roads lead to Rome, eh?"

His dense intellect, penetrated by Madame de Charmière's sharp look, had finally comprehended that an offensive and defensive alliance with her was imposed by circumstances. So he resolved to make common cause with her, with liberty to move otherwise in the future.

"You are right, citizen," said Taupier, "your affairs are no concern of mine, though you have meddled with mine. By the way, is not that your Zany that I met in the Place below?"

"Very likely," answered Pilevert shortly.

"That human heron pleases me. He has a way of catching flies with his gaping mouth that betokens strong tendencies towards social philosophy. What side does he take in politics?"

Pilevert would not have been more perplexed if he had been asked information on the Tycoon of Japan.

"I don't know and I don't care a hang," he snarled between his teeth.

"Curious indifference!" exclaimed Taupier, "but what do you yourself, my dear fellow-citizen, think of the future of modern society? An artiste ought to have opinions, or it would be a novelty! I wager you are a Positivist."

The dumbfounded athlete had not even the energy to make any kind of reply.

"Very well, citizen, you are not bound to answer; we are not at the club here," went on the imperturbable crookback, installing himself in an easy chair without being asked.

During this, the hostess had been thinking of delivering Valnoir and of preparing him for an inevitable meeting. Indeed, now that Pilevert was enlightened, it looked far from probable that he would consent to go away without seeing the man he sought, and what Rose above all had to prevent was a solitary interview between her lover and her brother. As for Taupier, whom she did not believe connected with Pilvert's secret, she saw no inconvenience in leaving them together in conversation.

"Pray, excuse me, sir," she said to the Hercules, "I have some orders to give, for I rely on your giving me the pleasure to stay to dine with two of my friends. At all events I can watch him," she reasoned, "and I shall be unlucky if the chambertin does not loosen his tongue."

"Faith, refusal's out of the question," rejoined Pilevert, rejoiced at a chance to dine well; "but Alcindor is still waiting for me below."

"I will send for him," said Madame de Charmière, forming her plan. And, as she passed her brother, beaming at so much attention, she whispered: "Stay and let me work the wires. To-morrow you shall know the whole bag of tricks." After this phrase, intended to quell any lingering rebellion, she disappeared with the swiftness of a swallow.

Taupier rubbed his hand and got ready to draw the bear. To make fun at well-built men was a choice pleasure to the humpback, and he would not lose such a fine opportunity of "chaffing" a man whose single blow of the fist would have pulverised him. He would have plunged into action less light-heartedly had he suspected that the burly mountebank had the dangerous advantage over him of having seen everything that occurred in the clearing.

"Well, my good fellow," he began, fidgetting about on his chair-edge like an ape, "how did you get clear of the scrape the other day with your hearse? Did you take the illustrious defunct to the ancestral vault?"

The showman did not reply to this coarse banter. He had taken out of his pocket a round object which he rolled between finger and thumb as if he had nothing else to think of.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Taupier, "you practise thimble-rig even in society, eh? Come, citizen juggler, show me a neat trick. Is that a pea you have there?"

"Oh, dear, no," said Pilevert, looking him in the face, "this here's a bullet, that's what this here is."

XI.

"A BULLET!" repeated Taupier, still mockingly. "That's a good idea—we are besieged, and true patriots ought only to play with lead. Citizen juggler, you deserve much of your country!"

Pilevert did not wince at the familiar tone, but continued to work the little projectile to the tips of his digits as if it were a talisman whose effects would soon be manifest.

"Only you are behind the age, old chap, it's not conical," continued the humpbacked wit, thinking much more of poking fun than of the duel

at Saint-Germain. "We have gone beyond such shapes—we kill no more with round bullets."

"Oh, yes, we do," retorted the showman, pursuing his idea; "this is a pistol bullet, and it's my opinion it would have killed its man sure enough if it had not been intercepted in its flight."

This time the allusion was too clear not to hit home. Taupier started in surprise, like a duellist who fancied he was facing a novice and recognises the real strength of his adversary by a scientific thrust. Like most of his kind, the humpback was quick-witted; but his ordinary lucidity was often annulled by his malignity. A less complete rogue would have felt uneasiness at meeting a more or less well-informed witness of the criminal trickery in the forest. But Taupier did evil with a simple unconsciousness which preserved him from remorse. He had breakfasted as gaily after the duel, in which M. de Saint-Senier had been murdered, as he would dine after libelling some honest man in his paper, and running up against Pilevert had not troubled either his heart or his digestion. Nevertheless, hardened though he was, the deformed publicist had felt the goad, and the mountebank's sentence opened an unpleasant field to him.

He might have been seen preparing the murder in which Valnoir was the involuntary accomplice, and the dread of punishment for the first time staggered his faith in impunity. Did this coarse fellow, who thus entered into his life, possess all the secrets of that night in the clearing? Taupier kept questioning himself, still loth to believe it. But, anyway, it was a point to clear up, and the humpback, not easily disconcerted, believed he might readily get the better of the Hercules.

"So you picked that up in the Forest of Saint-Germain, did you, my good fellow?" queried he to brave it out.

"It's likely," said the other coldly.

"Did you intend having it set in a ring as a present to your good lady, for you are the very man to have a wife?"

"No, I intend to make my fortune with it," returned Rose's brother, completely forgetting that she had recommended caution.

"The deuce! silver is scarcer than lead at present," exclaimed Taupier, decided to keep the ball rolling till it stopped.

"There is still some to be found at the roots of trees," retorted the showman.

This time Valnoir's comrade could not dissemble his nervous grimaces.

"Whew! he has seen everything, and he is a stouter champion than I imagined," thought he, rising so as not to show he had lost countenance.

His coolness was at an end, and he was seeking some means to retreat or cut short a conversation becoming menacing, when Madame de Charmière came in at the very nick of time to save him. She had not been more than half-an-hour gone, and yet had found time enough to change her dress, and, a less easy matter, bring her lover to the desired point. Pilevert's fragmentary revelation and Taupier's opening conversation had sufficiently enlightened her. She was sure there was a secret between Valnoir and the showman connected with the meeting at which Saint-Senier met his death. A weaker mind would have striven to prevent the interested persons coming in contact, but Rose had proceeded more boldly and skilfully.

To begin with, in ten minutes' talk, she had become persuaded that the captive in the boudoir did not suspect Pilevert's secret. Hence it remained between her brother and her, and would have to be extracted thereafter. For the present, the important thing was to secure the right

of receiving the showman freely, to arrive at which consummation Rose found nothing better than to collect the scattered actors in the plot, of which she held all the threads, around her dinner-board. A few caresses and half-a-dozen fibs sufficed to win over Valnoir, who piously believed in the unexpected arrival of a messenger bearing to the noble Dame de Charmière tidings of her brother exiled in Spain. She had even fended off further surprise by relating that a rather romantic hazard had led this providential envoy to the duelling-ground of Saint-Germain, and Taupier had recognised him.

Once this story was accepted, thanks to the blindness from which even literary life does not defend lovers, it was not very difficult to lead the journalist to dine in company with a showman and his funny man. The invitation had had an eccentric side fated to please the chief editor of the "Serpenteau."

"It will be droll," Madame de Charmière had said, and Valnoir, whose infatuation made him capable of greater meannesses, had yielded without too much entreaty.

So he made his entrance in tow of the enchantress, and nothing betrayed constraint or vexation in the bow he gave the guest imposed by Rose's globe-trotting kinsman. He even evinced condescension to the extreme of giving the Rampart of Avalon his hand to shake. Both flattered and abashed by the politeness of the man whom he calculated to "blackmail," Pilevert responded with a grasp that all but crushed his fingers. Charmed by this diversion, Taupier breathed more at ease and ruminated over a scheme to mate the dangerous enemy fallen from the clouds.

Alcindor's appearance came still more to his rescue. That tall comique, whom the tire-woman had gone and torn from the contemplation of the nursemaids in the Place, strutted into Madame de Charmière's gilded hall with as much assurance as though he had walked on Aubusson carpets all his life. His mealy face expressed sweet satisfaction, and he saluted the company with a sweeping bow which may have lacked grace but not some stateliness. The unappreciated scientist cropped through the fool, so that Valnoir instantly saw the way to enliven the banquet consented to in his weakness. He winked to Taupier, who fully understood and joyfully looked for the chance to elude the thorns of the situation. To bait Alcindor and make Pilevert drunk formed a programme highly delighting the humpback, little encouraged by the athlete's sulky phiz.

"Dinner is on the table!" announced Faufine's falsetto.

The lady of the house showed the way to her guests, neglecting all ceremonious forms, to the deep disappointment of the clown, who, to show off his fine manners, was arching his arm to take her in. The table was spread in a room hung with Cordovan leather and furnished with side-boards on which gleamed tolerable plate and varied pottery. Valnoir had introduced the artistic luxury of lustred ware at his lady-love's, she much more preferring plate to crockery. The table was round, the seats comfortable, the cloth dazzling white, and before each guest stood up the complete series of Bohemian glass, from the full-blown tulip-mouth cup to develop the bouquet of the famous Bordelais crus, to the tall glass in which champagne would fizz.

This promising array smoothed Pilevert's lowering brow, for meditation had even made him forget his bitters. Rose gave him the honour of the right-hand seat, and put Alcindor on her left, while Taupier sat next to him. Valnoir, as a pseudo-host, faced the mistress. The first course was

eaten in silence. Of all the party the clown was about the only one who ate without thinking at the same time, but he appeared endowed with an appetite capable of curbing his innate loquacity.

Faufine did the waiting, possessing all the talents for the duty, even including carving neatly, and pouring out at the next moment.

Madame de Charmière, expert in the art of graduating intoxication, had ordered out the innocent iced champagne, and would not too soon let loose the powerful Burgundian reserve. Pilevert, who mightily scorned the refreshing yet thin Epernay, contented himself, till something stronger was shown, with a Beaujolais which could not make his tongue wag. Taupier sought deeply for courage in a bottle of Madeira. Valnoir, who turned sentimental when tipsy on Moët, kept trying to catch Rose's eye, and caught it seldom, for she was solely occupied with the messenger sent from Spain by the last of the Charmières. He had to give it up and fell back on his idea of poking fun at the clown.

"Sir," he said, point blank, "I am sure that you entertain literary aspirations."

"Oh, my dreams!" melancholily sighed Alcindor, pouring out another bumper.

XII.

"So you have dreams, Alcindor, have you?" said Taupier, whose weakness it was to be familiar on short acquaintance.

He was impatiently lying in wait for the time to make the charges, and he had taken the word on the fly, like a racquet player. But the melancholy Merry Andrew did not answer. Plunged in the bliss of the first glasses of champagne, he seemed to follow into the gilded cornice above the flight of the visions he evoked.

"A poetic soul!" said Valnoir, to say something calling for a reply.

"The gentleman is young," insinuated Rose, who, notwithstanding her serious thoughts, could not resist the pleasure of making game.

The noble heiress of the knights of yore had followed the instruction taught in the celebrated private dining-room of the *café Anglais*, the *Grand-Seize*, whose fame extends from the Caucasus to Kentucky, and she was first class at showing up the ridiculous novice or rustic. Alcindor sadly wagged his head, and applied to the ice decanter for fresh consolation. "My friend Merry Andrew, you must have had adventures," broke in Taupier, who was not easily discouraged; "tell 'em me."

The adventurer sighed, but remained mute as a mackerel.

"Must you be pressed, Alcindor?" went on the humpback in a tragic tone; "dost thou refuse to unfold thy soul to another? and yet thou hast a past, for thy romantic name, Alcindor, telleth me that thy ancestors must have figured on fancy clocks in the troubadour's costume. Speak to me, I entreat thee, speak to me of thy youthful impressions."

This string of jests in dubious taste did not succeed even in making the strong man grin; the Beaujolais was turning sour on him.

"*Romanée-Conti* '58," said Faufine gravely, upon a signal from her mistress.

This cry of "Rally round Burgundy!" attracted Pilevert who had been fighting off intoxication the last fifteen minutes in order not to be garrulous. "Don't stint it, my girl," he said, holding up his largest glass. "I

have had enough of your thimblefuls. And don't you spout, you others. Alcindor has the gift of the gab more than all of you."

Valnoir and Taupier exchanged a gratified look as if a long expected actor had come on the boards.

"You need not say that, dear fellow," cried the chief editor of the "Serpenteau," "for we do not doubt it, and we were begging your assistant to propound his ideas. I am sure he has a politico-literary system, and I am ready to open our columns to him."

"Open your what, youngster?" demanded the Samson, already losing his cue among the Côte d'or vines.

"Our columns, our sheet, if that term pleases you better, venerable Alcides," responded Taupier, overjoyed to see the Romanée operating.

"Oh, shut up, Fénélon!" roared the athlete, with a majestic gesture.

"Why do you give me the sweet name of the Swan of Cambrai?" queried the deformed one; "rather style me Philistine, terrible Samson that you are, on condition that you lend me your ass's jawbone."

"Mind your own, you spiteful humpy!" vociferated the man of muscles, rising furiously; "I'll just talk about you to the nearest police inspector."

"Would you please drink my brother's health, dear sir?" said Rose pleasantly, fastening her clear, chilling gaze on Pilevert.

A douche of ice water upon the irascible wrestler's head would not have calmed him sooner. He dropped back heavily into his chair and grumbled:

"Don't be cross about a little thing like that, I only said Fénélon because he is an author, and I am not fond of authors—I ain't. Anyhow, that's quite enough of it!"

This peroration was accompanied by a formidable bang of the fist which rattled the glasses like an earthquake. Taupier, whose clayey face had blanched, found that his jokes were three bottles too premature, and that it was risky to exasperate the man of might before the second course. Valnoir, who did not like rough scenes, considered that the hope of the Charmières sent odd representatives to his sister. And Rose deemed this the moment to conjure away the storm, and made use of Alcindor as the lightning rod.

"Will you not also toast the absent?" she inquired in her most melodious voice.

"The absent!" echoed the clown, beginning to enter the lyrical stage of inebriety, "alas, the absent are my dreams!"

"Dreams again! he's all on dreams!" muttered the incorrigible crook-back.

"Yea, my dreams, my illusions flown away, for I am twenty-six and never yet has man comprehended me."

"Well, here's a fine opportunity for you to be weighed in the balance, dear M. Alcindor," said Valnoir, with difficulty keeping his countenance. "Lay bare your theory, for any man with long hair like yours is bound to have a theory."

"You cry for it?" said Alcindor tragically. "Then, *habet*! I am going once more to expose myself to the raillery of the world, for you are of the world whilst I am merely a player."

The two journalists protested with an encouraging wave of the hand.

"I must commence by relating my life," proceeded the clown, "for 'all is in all'; and the story of my life is that of my beliefs."

"He speaks finely," commented Taupier admiringly.

"Know then," continued the flattered orator, "that I am of Grecian

origin, as my name Alcindor Panaris denotes, albeit I was born at Pontoise where my parents bestowed on me an excellent education—”

“Hang it all ! he starts from too far back,” muttered Valnoir.

“At the age of twenty, I had already been refused admission into the Naval College, the Polytechnic School, the Normal School, the—”

“What you are giving them outsiders there,” observed the showman, “is so many barks at the door thrown away, and you know I am down on wasting things.”

“Just as I am on wasting copy !” added the humpback news-writer judiciously.

“And the Military Academy of Saint-Cyr to boot, where I presented myself, notwithstanding my aversion to standing armies,” went on the unshaken clown.

“Dear Alcindor,” cried Taupier, grasping his hands, “if you continue to detail your woes, madame will be obliged to weep and we shall not be able to sing over the nuts and oranges. Pray explain your system at once.”

“Why should I ?” grumbled the orator, vexed at being interrupted.

“In order that we may adopt it. Oh, thou great man unappreciated ! consider we are simple writers who are still seeking their way, and open a vista to us.”

“I am a fusionist,” said Alcindor, with the same air as the contemporaries of Sylla said they were “Roman citizens.”

“Fusio—what ?” sneered Taupier.

“What creed is this ?” inquired Valnoir without a smile.

“That of the future,” cried the clown as one inspired, whilst emptying his neighbour’s Madeira into his glass. “I would blend all things, culture, opinions, nationalities.”

“And wines,” added Rose, smiling.

“Then would there be no more kings, no rich men, no wars. Man would produce and consume, the earth would be covered with harvests ripening on the site of palaces—”

“Musset said the same in a couplet,” interposed Valnoir, “to wit :

‘And our shaven globe, devoid of hair and beard,
Rolled in the heavens like a pumpkin weird.’”

“Ah ! pumpkin soup ! how nice our grandmother made it !” moaned the Terror of the Amphitheatre, turning towards Madame de Charmière, who could have dispensed with this retrospective detail.

“I see that you do not follow me,” grumbled the fusionist. “Men of letters are the greatest enemies of humanitarian philosophy. I shall exclude them from the society I am going to found.”

“Going to found a society, eh ?” queried Taupier, struck by an idea.

“My project is here,” said Alcindor, pommelling his forehead.

“May we know the aim of this society and the means to establish it ?” inquired Valnoir, still with a stern upper lip.

“I have told you the aim : ’tis the fusion of all things. The means is in the abolition of all things.”

“Phew ! it’s a wide scheme ! it’s lovely ! I like it,” cried Taupier, clapping his hands with enthusiasm.

“To say nothing of its likelihood to take immensely at the present time,” observed Valnoir.

“Hark, ye, Alcindor,” squaked the humpback, “can you speak in public ?”

"In six languages, and on any given subject," responded the philosopher of the future without flinching.

"Good ! now can you write an article that will stand on its legs ?"

"A dozen a day, if you want 'em. Before I came out under the governor's fostering wing, I alone edited the 'Amalgamator,' organ of the Fusionists, which ran eight numbers before it was put down by the police."

"Young man, your future is at your feet. Will you fuse yourself with the staff of the 'Serpenteau' ?"

"Yes, if it will uphold my principles," answered Alcindor with the firmness of an apostle.

"Are you drunk or mad ?" demanded Valnoir of the humpback secretly, nudging him hard.

"Let me alone, I know what I am about," replied the latter.

Madame de Charmière had attentively followed this colloquy, whilst picking the fruit off a splendid cluster of Fontainebleau grapes, for the dessert was now on. As for Pilevert, he had not clearly comprehended the humanitarian debate, and he was discussing a famous vintage of the Rhone, when the distorted newspaper man's proposition struck him.

"Stop a bit !" roared he ; "none of your decoying my clown away."

"Illustrious Rampart of Avallon, you will no longer need him," explained Taupier, "the 'Serpenteau' also takes you on. You ought to be pretty well up in all sorts of weapons."

"A trifle, my lad. Anything from a hand-saw to a harpoon. I am anybody's man. I have the papers to prove it."

"Capital ! you shall be the fighting editor to receive anybody bringing complaints. Ten francs a-day and all the tobacco you can smoke."

"Taupier, my friend, you are taking too much on yourself," remonstrated Valnoir in a whisper.

"It is not a burden," returned the humpback aloud, "as I shall explain to you presently. But before I elucidate my views, which I am sure our fair president will approve of, I appeal to all your wits for a good title for our society."

"It is superfluous—I have it, and I am not open to corrections," said Alcindor stoutly.

"Let us hear it, please," said Rose, smiling.

"The Fusionist association," said the clown loftily, "will be known by the name of the 'Society You Can't Light your Pipe at the Moon !'"

XIII.

"He's mad," murmured Valnoir.

"Silence for the orator !" cried Taupier, appearing to take the clown's vagaries most seriously.

Truth to say, there was some reason for doing so. Since he had given reins to his eloquence, Alcindor was transfigured. His large eyes stood out of their sockets, his yellow locks serpentine down on his thin shoulders, and his long arms traced oratorical gestures in the empty air. He was so restless on the leather chair, and his sudden loquacity contrasted so strongly with his melancholy silence during the first course, that a classic scholar would have compared him indifferently to the Cumæan, Sybil, or Balaam's ass.

"Gentlemen, I mean citizens," he began with imperturbable gravity,

"the name I give the Fusionian Society makes you smile. There, I perceive the disastrous influence of the present-day press. You are journalists of the Decline and Fall of France, and you mock at what you cannot comprehend. Ah, if you comprehended me!"

"But we do not," said Valnoir between his teeth. "I heard all this stuff in the 'Saltimbanques' at the Varieties Theatre."

"But you shall comprehend," proceeded Alcindor, rising to orate with more freedom. "To 'light your pipe at the moon' is a phrase in our effete society to express impossibility. Impossibility! that is a retrograde noun I mean to strike off the rolls of the language of the future. Yes! by the force of association, citizens, the emancipated proletariat will 'light its pipe at the moon' of universal happiness."

At this metaphor, more extravagant than literary, Valnoir could not help bursting into laughter, and Rose had the utmost difficulty not to do the same. Pilevert, reduced to silence by a last bottle of Tavel wine, had no power to prevent his "barker" pouring out "patter." The humpback was the only one who went into enthusiasm over Alcindor's ramblings.

"You are great as the world itself!" he ejaculated, making as if to hug the orator. "The 'Society Light your Pipe at the Moon' is founded, and the 'Serpenteau' becomes its official mouthpiece."

"A fine means of increasing its circulation!" jeered Valnoir, shrugging his shoulders.

"Tush! will you listen to me and answer me?" said Taupier in the firm tone of one sure of what he advocates. "Do you believe in the power of mere words in this country?"

"Of course I do! I make money by that. If I were to write like everybody else, my paper would not have three hundred subscribers."

"Do you believe that mystery attracts idiots? Do you not believe that with passwords and oaths taken on drawn daggers, an army of jolterheads can be recruited capable of overturning any government you like to name?"

"An old trick. You are telling the story of Carbonarism."

"Good—now we agree. You shall found with us the 'Pipes lit at the Moon.'"

"What for?"

"In order to make you President of the Republic in six months, you simpleton of a journalist."

"Excuse me, but I do not want any presidents nor any republics," interrupted the clown.

"Allow me to have my turn, illustrious innovator! Our friend Valnoir has talent and readers, but no Utopia to draw the masses. Alcindor has the Utopia, but no pedestal. Therefore you complete each other. The 'Serpenteau' will insidiously propagate Fusionism, which, on its side, will recruit an army for voting, and, at need, for the barricades, and we shall govern Paris while waiting to govern the world."

"Why not?" asked Madame de Charmière, who had not missed one word of the humpback's reasonings.

This perfidious inquiry was accompanied by a look cunningly calculated to arouse all greed and ambition in Valnoir. Since they came to table, Rose had had time to listen and reflect whilst watching the progress of her brother's drunkenness.

Through Taupier's exaggerations, she began to perceive a plan whose execution might permit her largely to utilize her relations with a journalist. Infinite prospects unfolded at the humpback's seductive voice,

and unexpected propositions were assumed by the connection which the noble lady had first accepted as moderately advantageous. Highly expert in business matters, Madame de Charmière lacked the correct judgment which accurately values situations. Everything was possible in her eyes, in politics as well as love; she therefore pondered seriously upon basing her fortune on her cavalier's future grandeur. Taupier's odd combination offered the further advantage of keeping together the men she wished to study closely, and she aimed at employing them all for her gain.

"Why not?" she cried, addressing Valnoir, "why should you not become all your friend suggests? To rise while serving the cause of humanity is an ambition anyone may boast of, and it is one I cherish for you, dear Charles."

"But it's absurd," said the editor of the "Serpenteau." "How can you expect me to sustain theories in my journal which nobody can understand, not even myself?"

"Don't worry about that, I'll manage it," said the humpback. "Alcindor will write you splendid leaderettes, and I will do you *feuilletons* that will make your mouth water."

"Is it on such literature that you hope we shall rise?"

"Perhaps, dear friend, perhaps," said Taupier vexedly. "Anyway you cannot prevent us organising our secret society. The plan is made. The association sub-divides itself into sections called quarters; the managerial committee, to which you'll belong if you like, will be the full moon, and the password will be the 'Eclipse' or 'Crescent.' Then there will be insignia and an oath."

"Admirable!" cried the transported clown.

"Very well so far. How about funds?" said Valnoir coldly.

"Two sous per week and per head off the Pipes lit at the Moon, for the members will go by that name for short, and I know where to enlist them. We shall have millions in three months."

"I have a treasurer to propose," interposed Madame de Charmière.

"Who's that, please?" queried the humpback, who would willingly have held the post himself.

"My business agent Frapillon," said Rose without hesitation. "He is silent as the tomb, he loves the lower classes, and he is honest."

"And able into the bargain," muttered Valnoir, yielding. "He keeps the capital of our paper, and if he pronounces the society feasible, I believe my objections would be removed."

"Not mine," blurted out Pilevert, whom the guests all believed was still engaged in wrestling with the Rhône wine.

"Are you actually listening, you venerable Hercules?" said Taupier, resting his elbows on the table in order to admire the toper capable of carrying on a conversation after his seventh bottle.

"Yes, I am listening, but I cannot 'tumble' to it."

"Never mind, my hero, it's quite unnecessary."

"I tell you that I want to know what you are plotting," resumed Rose's brother, pounding the board with his dreadful fist. "Your Moon and your 'Serpenteau'—they're all one to me; but you talk about monopolizing Frapillon and I want Frapillon myself. I have information to obtain from him."

"The wretch is drunk, and will let out everything," thought Rose in afflict. "Gentlemen!" she exclaimed, "coffee is ready in the drawing-room, and my cigars are prime."

"I tell you that I mean to see Frapillon," persisted the athlete with drunken obstinacy.

"So you shall, Rampart of Avallon, you shall at our office, where you are going to be employed to fight our battles—one, two—there, my champion!" cried the humpback, making lunges with his thin arm as long as a feneing foil.

"Ay, ay," mumbled the showman, trying to collect his thoughts; "I know—something to do—ten francs and tobacco—but I don't want it. I can do better than that, and, besides, I cannot leave Régine."

"And who is Régine, valiant warrior?" inquired Taupier, sneeringly. "The lady of your love, I suppose?"

At the name, heard for the first time, Madame de Charmière became heedful.

"Régine is my pupil," rejoined Pilevert, "and the first man who utters a word against her—"

"I have not the least desire, Orson of my heart; but does she chance to be that savage beauty whom we saw in the Forest of Saint-Germain?"

"Why do you ask, you twisted skein?"

"Only because we'll put her in the ambulances. She has a marked vocation for tending the wounded. I see her still kneeling beside—"

"It's stifling here!" cried Valnoir, springing up; "let us get a change of air in the drawing-room."

"And coffee too—to say nothing of the spirits," added Taupier, delighted at ending the sitting. Madame de Charmière hastened to show her guests the way. Alcindor followed, trying to bear himself becomingly, and Pilevert closed the line, still fairly steady on his legs. The coffee had been carefully made by that intelligent factotum, Faufine, and the humpback, who strongly appreciated this obligatory epilogue of a good dinner, installed himself near the table covered with tempting liqueurs. Alcindor and his master, whom Rose kept in view, were retained in the same haven by the gracious offer of odoriferous mocha. Valnoir alone, to drive away the black memory bluntly called up by the humpback, went and leaned out on the balcony rail.

Night had closed in long since, but the sky was brilliant with stars. Madame de Charmière's lover had lighted a cigar, and was absently staring down on the Place, when a singular sight attracted his attention.

XIV

THE promenaders were no longer so numerous beneath the trees; only a few belated customers were bargaining for the last nosegays culled in the charming suburbs which the war would soon destroy. But in the corner of the Place, on Madame de Charmière's side, a dense restless crowd had gathered, and its hubbub mounted to the balcony. Valnoir could not divine the meaning of the outcries, and still less the cause of the gathering, but he plainly discerned a woman in the heart of this noisy ring. It seemed to him that she was trying to break through the serried edge and that her flight was opposed. In his present state of mind, street riots could not interest him, but he was endeavouring to drive away the blue devils, and watched the movements of the throng bustling at his feet just to enliven himself.

Finally, the woman causing the stir sat down on a bench; and Valnoir

believed she hid her face in her hands, and he concluded she was weeping. The ardent polemics of newspaperdom, and his daily quarrels with his Venus, had not so hardened the chief-editor of the "*Serpenteau*," that he had ceased to be accessible to pity. Besides, he felt the need of action which almost always follows violent mental strain, for the events of these last three days had strangely played on his nerves. The evening just over was not calculated to calm them, and though he had but poorly tested Madame de Charmière's wine-cellar, he felt stifled in the close indoor air. Moreover, the society of the two mountebanks was becoming odious, and Taupier's pleasantry annoyed him. So he thought of obtaining a nearer view of what was going on below, and taking advantage of the change of air to collect his thoughts.

"Your smokes are execrable, my love," said he, returning into the room, "all those Havannah brands are frauds, and I shall go down to the cigar shop yonder and buy a genuine native *Londrès*."

At any other time, Rose, never letting word or deed pass unconsidered, would have wanted to know what was Valnoir's motive in leaving; but she had all her work cut out to watch her brother who, under the influence of some real Black Forest kirsch, was talking too freely to Taupier. She even felt the necessity of breaking up the party.

"Do so, darling," she answered, without moving, "and if you see a carb to hold four on the boulevard, hire it; we'll go for a blow in the Champs-Élysées."

"Just my idea, for I have a maddening headache," replied Valnoir, taking his hat.

As he was passing through the ante-chamber, he heard the humpback's shrill voice saying to Pilevert:

"It's a go, my old mastodon! I will get your pet into the ambulance of my illustrious friend the great Doctor Molinchart."

This reminded him of the girl whose name had been uttered at dinner by the showman. He had had hardly more than a glimpse at her in the Forest of Saint-Germain, and yet the figure was engraved on his mind, as are all the objects surrounding a terrible scene. Other forms mingled in his memory and, whilst going downstairs, Valnoir reflected on the strange concurrence of circumstances which brought together at Madame de Charmière's the actors who were chance-met on the fatal duelling ground. Since his return to Paris, he had been seldom out and had no mind to go and see Podensac and learn the sequel of the combat. Engrossed by military news, the papers hardly noticed an event which would have been a nine days' wonder in other times. They limited themselves to relating the return of the vehicle carrying back M. de Saint-Senier and his seconds, which had much difficulty in escaping the Prussians, a troop of Uhlans having followed them up to the outposts.

This was all Valnoir knew, and he had neither the time nor the heart to question Pilevert on the sad journey. The recollection of Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier going up the Madeleine steps in deep mourning, still further clouded him, and when he stepped out upon the Place he had almost forgotten what brought him down. Moreover, he had come uselessly, for the crowd had scattered and its components were going away.

"Oh, the woman's crazy," said the loiterers as they obeyed the exhortations of two policemen attracted by the mob.

Valnoir questioned one of these men, hooded with his coat cape, who were replacing the former *sergents de ville*, and learnt that the idlers had

foolishly flocked round a queerly attired woman, who was, however, quite inoffensive.

"I cleared off the loafers, and she went up towards the church," said the placid representative of authority, "but she'll be in luck if she does not get another mob round her in such a costume."

Thus answered with details little interesting him, Valnoir proceeded listlessly towards the Flower Market to seek coolness under the trees. It was a magnificent evening, and under the pale moonshine the long colonnade of the Madeleine assumed grand proportions. Silence reigned around it and the chairs along the esplanade were vacant. He slowly strolled through the market without meeting a soul, for the vendors had packed up and departed. He mournfully meditated, and was rounding the church corner to make the circuit of the Place, when he almost ran up against a woman coming from the opposite direction. On drawing back briskly, he raised his head and could not repress an exclamation of surprise.

By the gas-lamp, he recognised the girl of the Forest of Saint-Germain. The view he had was shorter than then, for the strange creature turned round and rapidly retraced her steps. But her flight was not so quick that Valnoir could not notice one item in her costume: the dark cloak enveloping her allowed her small feet to be seen in green pointed heel slippers. She sped along the broad-flagged walk behind the church. At the same time a hired cab was driving from the spot up the Rue Tronchet, and Valnoir fancied a woman's hand waved good-bye at the window. All this passed so swiftly that he might have imagined it a dream, but the stranger turned round before disappearing at the corner of the opposite railings. There could be no doubt now, for the mantle flew open, and he saw the red dress and the bare arms of the woman who had knelt down beside Saint-Senier.

Urged by some vague motive, Madame de Charmière's conquest hurried on. It was a good chance of hunting away the blues, and to learn something about Pilevert's "pupil." Furthermore, the projected drive in company of Rose's guests did not tempt him, and so he readily decided to follow the girl. Arrived at the corner, he saw she had gained on him, and was making for the Rue Royale. He took the same line, but at a distance which would not alarm her. She seemed, however, to have forgotten their meeting, for she never looked round, and proceeded to the Place de la Concorde with a fleet steady step. Clearly she had a goal, and not a distant one probably. Valnoir had, therefore, fair ground to believe that he would soon ascertain whither, at such an hour, a woman was running in ball slippers and without a hat.

"It was certainly around her that the mob had gathered under Rose's window," thought he, "but what the deuce is she after here?"

The more he sought for a reasonable answer, the less he found one. It did occur to him, for a second, that she was really mad, and he was on the point of giving up the chase; but he bethought him of the other stranger, who had signalled out of the hackney-coach window, and again he resolved to pierce this complication of mysteries. One means of doing so was to accost the nocturnal rambler, and ask her for an explanation, for he did not know she was deaf and dumb; but Valnoir did not care too much about making himself known before he was better informed on the motive of the singular promenade. The quarry took an unexpected direction. Instead of crossing the bridge, or going up the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, where some carriage-lamps still glittered, she plunged under the large trees of the

Cours-la-Reine. Rather astonished, Valnoir walked faster so as not to lose sight of her. He reached the turn of the walk with the woman only twenty paces ahead when a man concealed in a clump of foliage suddenly leaped out. The last gas-lamp of the Place gave sufficient light to reveal a flashing steel, and the scoundrel who wielded it fell upon the girl.

XV.

EDITING the "Serpenteau," and adoring Madame de Charmière had much injured Valnoir's heart and mind, but still this had not made him a coward. If he had had time to reflect, he might have hesitated to risk anything for a strange woman of suspicious bearing; but his first impulse carried him away, and all he saw was a pretty girl attacked by a footpad.

"Stop, you villain!" he shouted and ran straight at the fellow, whom he caught by the throat in a few seconds.

"Let me go, and the devil take you!" gasped the other, letting a musket fall from one hand.

With much presence of mind, Valnoir picked it up, and covered him with it, saying: "Be off or I'll blow the roof of your head off!"

"Why, dash it all! it's my place to order you to stand off!" replied the man in a drunken voice.

The girl had taken advantage of his surprise to wrench herself free and she leaned trembling against a tree. Valnoir went up to the assailant, with the bayonet at the ready, to study him closely; it was a national guardsman so intoxicated he could hardly keep on his feet.

"Why did you attack this woman?" demanded the champion, not dissatisfied at bottom that he had nothing more dreadful to meet.

"I wasn't attacking her—I was arrestiug her."

"By what right?"

"Eh! what! ain't I put on guard to arrest everybody? What sense would there be in making a revolution if a soldier of the 7th company of the 322nd can't take up any woman and put her in the guard-house?"

Whilst expounding this novel theory, the drunkard grasped the gun-barrel and tried to snatch it from Valnoir, who thought it was high time to end the contest. So he gave a vigorous blow to the defender of public order, who rolled into the gutter, and ran to the girl. She had not wholly recovered from her fright, yet had the strength to offer her hand to her deliverer, who led her to the quay, where he showed her a bench whilst the soldier was trying to get up amid much bad language. Without heeding him any longer, Valnoir stood the gun beside him and found in his pocket a bottle of smelling salts which he must have picked up at Madame de Charmière's.

He gently parted the curls on her forehead and was admiring the strange beauty of the pallid face, scarcely seen on the duelling ground, when she sprang up with a profoundly attentive look at him.

"What's the matter?" queried the astounded Valnoir, trying to take her hand again, but she repulsed him with horror and disgust.

Madame de Charmière's conquest was not used to inspiring a revulsion so energetically expressed, and after some surprise, he felt a sharp irritation which he could not help evincing.

"Yours is a singular mode of thanking people who serve you," he said,

drily. "Let me tell you, my fair one, that I have a great mind to hand you over to the amiable Bacchus who is howling for you yonder."

She made no verbal reply, but raising her head proudly, she looked at him fixedly as much as to say :

"Do it if you dare !"

The trees of the Cours did not cast their shade on the riverside and the night was clear enough for this to be visible. She looked so lovely then that Valnoir felt remorse and sought pardon for his brutality.

"I was wrong," he said softly, "and I grant that I must have pained you, but why do you treat me so ?"

The flash of the large black eyes died away, but that was all in the way of resentment disappearing.

"I am not entirely a stranger to you," proceeded Valnoir, drawing nearer. "I saw you once before under painful circumstances, and I know your name is Régine."

She stepped towards the street.

"Why do you refuse to reply to me ?" demanded Rose's gallant, understanding nothing of this stubborn silence.

Régine kept on her way.

"I believe she is dumb," muttered he, closing up again.

She stopped short and waved him away.

"This is getting curious !" muttered the stupefied gentleman. "Why did not that showman say something about this ?"

So the snowman had, but to Podensac, and neither the "Serpenteau's" editor nor his right hand man, Taupier, had heard his confidential communication.

"Pshaw ! I daresay she's not deaf, too, and so we shall get along." Upon which reasoning, he touched Régine's arm, she shuddering at the contact, and continued : "Mademoiselle, I am not sure that you hear me, but I must notify you that, notwithstanding your very clearly manifested desire to be rid of me, I am bound to see you home or any where else you please. I have no intention at all to offend you, but I cannot allow you to wander at such an hour in the lonely streets. I shall therefore accompany you till you are safe from ugly meetings."

Régine had stopped and seemed to study the movement of his lips.

"I would have you further remark," continued Valnoir, thinking he had talked her over, "that you are wrong to hope you can conceal the aim of your nightly promenade. Wherever you go in this array, in such times as these, you will certainly be stopped, as has twice already happened to you. Do not deny it ! I have followed you from the Place de la Madeleine, and I saw you on the bench when the police came to protect you. Hence, whether the police or the soldiers arrest you, your secret will be endangered, it strikes me."

The girl dropped her hand as if in consent and started off to go down the river.

"This is altogether too queer !" cried Valnoir, obstinately keeping step with her ; "too much, and I am going to know all about it."

The deeper he got into the adventure, so thoroughly unexpected, the more he was lost in conjectures and desire to see it out. Before turning to poetics, he had written novels, and there was so much unused stock of fancy left over from that profession, that he had not expended it all upon Madame de Charmière. Excelling in the management of love affairs, she wholly lacked startling novelty, and wrangles and fondlings alternated in

her house with desperate regularity. Yielding like all lovers, Valnoir submitted to relations as regular as the payment of coupons, but his natural proclivities came back at the gallop as soon as the ex-romancist again faced the charm of novelty. It was sheer curiosity, and his ardour for the Charmière was not weakened; but it was curiosity super-heated to the degree of passion. As he walked, he examined Régine, and it exasperated him that he could read nothing on her countenance. She did not turn, and pressed on so that he had much ado to keep up. She moved in a straight line with her eyes fastened on a point invisible to her persecutor. The Quai de Billy was passed at an ever-increasing pace, and they had gone beyond the Trocadéro before Valnoir made a final attempt.

"Régine, my dear girl, do stop, I entreat you!" said Valnoir, in a voice of emotion; "the road is deserted, and you are approaching the fortification wall; and the gates are closed now the siege has begun. I think you are only taking this way to tire me out, but you cannot do that. Come back with me, and I give you my word of honour to leave you in the hands of your guardian—the Pilevert man who brought you up."

Régine did not appear to hear. Her immobile features merely expressed internal enthusiasm. She was like a somnambulist who did not see the ground she trod upon. They went through Passy and the part of Auteuil by the Pont de Grenelle. The few people about paid no attention to what seemed a young couple hastening homeward. Valnoir began to get angry with one of those sullen furies arising from weariness, and particularly ruffled pride. In a few minutes they would reach the Point-du-Jour gate, where the admirer of Madame de Charmière had no wish to have to give an account of his singular companion to the national guards on the ramparts.

"It's clear that you will not listen to me," he said, grinding his teeth. "Well, since you are bent on being arrested, hang me if I do not do it."

With which, he seized Régine's arm; she shook herself free, bounded away and ran with all her speed into a lane on the left side of the road. Valnoir pursued her, but he was fatigued and she got down on the strand before he could overtake her. The viaduct of the Outer Circle Railway lifted its colossal arches over their heads, and the shore was encumbered by all kinds and sizes of boating craft.

"By Jove! she's going to throw herself into the water," cried Valnoir, seeing her step on this accidental raft.

He followed her by leaping from one boat to another, and at the same time stepped into a row boat farther out than the rest into the stream. At the very moment he grasped her cloak, Régine broke away with a mighty effort and precipitated herself into the flood.

XVI.

VALNOIR was so excited that he was on the point of diving in after the fugitive. Violent action reacts on the mind, and the extreme resolution of which a man would be incapable as he strolled quietly along, becomes quite natural after a hot run. Under shot and shell a soldier will take a barricade in three skips that would cost him five minutes to clamber over coolly. In the same way, the editor of the "Serpenteau"—who would not have laid down his cigar perhaps, two hours ago, to save Régine—was going to leap into the Seine solely because he was heated in brain and blood by pursuing the girl. It is true that second thoughts soon calmed

him and he stopped in time : but he had faltered at least a minute. Régine's splash had been but faint, and, moreover, the riverside appeared absolutely deserted so that outside succour was not to be expected. Already calmed, Valnoir cared little about that. He would have to explain his business there and relate in full an adventure as long as ridiculous. Whilst he was thus reflecting, he thought he saw the girl's body rise up a few yards from the boat. Remorse spurring him, he thought of rowing out to her. He was stooping to unfasten the boat when he perceived it was done, for the leap of two persons at top speed into the cockleshell had broken the painter and the skiff was loose.

"Good !" thought Valnoir, returning to his previous impulse, "I shall reach her the sooner."

A rapid glance showed him a dark patch floating on the surface. It was still time. Before becoming a political light, the journalist had frequently enough cruised in Bougival waters to acquire tolerable notions of oarsmanship.

"I shall be unlucky if I do not fish her out," he muttered, as he hunted for the oars without finding anything of the sort after a thorough exploration.

He rose quickly and tried to catch hold of another wherry, but they were too far off by this time, and he had to renounce all hope of doing so. The current was not strong inshore, but Valnoir's unreasonable movements had worked the boat well out, and in the middle of the channel there was enough water to sweep it swiftly on.

Before him rose the railway bridge and made him fearful about his adventure. He had no means of guiding the bark, which was urged towards the central arch, but he had the hope of seizing one of the iron rings in the piles as he sailed by, and he got ready to do so. The shadow of the great bridge covered the river afar and Régine's body had gone down. He believed the poor girl drowned and thought of himself alone.

The nearer the viaduct, the stronger the current, so that the boat was hurled most rapidly under the vault. He clung to the gunnel with one hand and held out the other to catch any hold. By leaning far over at the risk of up-setting the boat, he did touch the masonry, but his fingers slipped over the polished stones and the rings eluded him through being too high or too low.

In a few seconds he had shot the archway, and, fatigued by his useless efforts, was going to drop down in the bottom of the boat, when he perceived a black bar to the river beyond. Hope returned as he remembered that piles had been recently driven in to oppose the Prussians' nautical feats, an obstacle which would stop his career. But he had not considered all the necessities of defence. To facilitate the passage of gunboats and floating batteries, there was a free space in the midst of the dam and, unluckily, the boat was carried straight towards this gap. If the involuntary navigator had had anything like a boat-hook even, he might have stood some chance of hooking on to one of the spars of the stockade, but there were only the two thwart in the whole boat, and they were nailed down fast. Even the rudder was removed, so that Valnoir could not in the least alter the course.

At the very time when he was passing the centre of the water gate, despite himself, he started with much emotion to see a shapeless object floating within his reach. Thinking it was something to detain himself by, he bent over and seized Régine's mantle, still afloat. Recognizing it at

once, he flung it in the bottom of the boat, in full belief that its owner was no more. He did not wonder what had become of her, because this was not a fit time for long reflections. The dilemma was grave. So long as he sailed outside the walled-in water, Madame de Charmière's devotee ran no great risks. The worst was to be forced to call out for help and explain away his nocturnal ramble to the soldiers or national guards. Now he had passed the regular lines, and the slow but sure current drove him into more vital dangers.

Valnoir, as a newspaper writer fully cognisant of military matters, knew well that the Prussians already occupied the left bank of the Seine, and the stream made so many bends that the unmanageable bark stood a good chance of running ashore in the enemy's ground. This would upset all his future projects, and, what pained him still more, deprive Rose of him. The worshipper was not so blind as regarded his idol, as to believe that absence would only make her heart grow fonder, and he did not hope to find it his after the war was over. Moreover, it was stated that prisoners were sent into the interior of Germany, and the prospect of spending the winter in a Pomeranian village was dreadful to a man whose life, amours, and ambition were closely linked to the Boulevard des Italiens. Sadly he looked at this perspective. He had to remember also that sharpshooters, both French and German, lined the Seine banks, and that he would soon be taken between two fires. He was even astonished that he had crossed the space between the railway bridge and fortifications unchallenged.

The sharp report of a musket cut short his brooding, and a bullet played at ducks-and-drakes on the water a few yards off. The Point-du-Jour bastion, which he had passed, was firing on him. Valnoir's first impulse was to throw himself down in the hollow of the wherry. He was brave in the usual sense of the word; that is to say, he never refused to go out on the field of honour with persons whom he aggrieved, and he bore himself well enough there; but he was not such a master of his nerves as not to duck to the bullets when nobody was looking. His next idea was to call out he was a Frenchman; but he was not sure of being understood, and his shouting might bring on him a general discharge. He deemed it more prudent therefore to let the boat drift and trust to his lucky star. For the time being it kept the mid-channel; the night had darkened and Valnoir, by playing the dead man, had chances of avoiding the projectiles until a happy turn of the flow sent him towards the right bank.

Unfortunately the shot from the bastion had aroused all the sharpshooters on both shores, and a fusillade began to crack out. The danger was not immediate, for the engagement took place farther on; but in a short time the drifting boat would be well exposed. Sitting in the stern, Valnoir was glancing round him wistfully, when he fancied he saw a swimmer on the right before him making for the French side. He could contain himself no more but shouted with all his lungs:

"Help! this way!"

But whether he had heard or not, or had reasons not to accept the invitation, the swimmer, instead of stopping, pressed on the more, and almost instantaneously disappeared in the willows under the bank. Valnoir would have liked to imitate him, but in boating practice he had neglected natation and he could not have gone ten strokes. It was better to fall into the Prussians' hands than drown, however, and he was sorry he had not given way to his first impulse, and dived in after Régine. On the other hand, he regretted he had called out, for three or four shots came

from the right bank, and a sharp patter on the prow, proved that the bullets had found their mark. He lay down again and did not stir.

At this juncture, he bitterly deplored the silly whim urging him to follow Régine, and he would have willingly signed away all his property in the "Serpenteau" to have the boat turn to the right. But, on the contrary, he perceived the reverse tendency and a slower motion. Yet the current seemed the same; but the wherry was heavier. Valnoir was puzzling about the explanation of the phenomenon when he felt a chill, and, on putting down his hand, found it wet. He went on groping and could not repress a scream of despair, water was pouring in forward, and the wherry was slowly filling.

XVII.

VALNOIR found that the water poured in at a broad aperture, the boat being built of thin planks, and one of them had been broken below the water line. Whether the injury came from a pile or the bullets, Valnoir did not know and he had no time to learn, for he had to stop the gap forthwith or perish. Régine's cloak was the first thing coming to hand, and he used it as a wad, but it only imperfectly stayed the inrush. Little as this was, since Valnoir had no vessel to bale it out, the foundering was only a question of time. He made a try at throwing out the water with his hat and his hands, but was obliged to give up these means, dangerous as well, for the slowly advancing boat was again a target for the Prussian marksmen. The bullets recommenced singing, so that Valnoir durst not move lest he showed himself above the side.

It was one of those situations when the most fertile of inventive spirits would have seen no chance of safety, and the ill-fated adorer of Madame de Charmière gave himself up as lost. To the despair at quitting life was added a rage at ending so ridiculously.

"To die, drowned in this egg-box like a rat in a trap," growled he, "what a fate!"

Then he remembered his body might be found and taken to the Morgue, and that idea gave him "the creeps." He anticipated that the newspapers hostile to him would not fail to assert that the chief editor of the "Serpenteau" had died whilst carrying intelligence to the Germans.

"Taupier will not be sorry to replace me," he mused in bitterness.

Rose's name came to his lips and he said that she also would soon find a substitute. Cholera restored him some energy. Better to be the Prussians' prisoner than sink to the bottom of the Seine. So he made up his mind to call again for help, at risk of receiving gunshots for answer.

"If I must die," he muttered, "I prefer the bullet; it kills quicker."

As the boat kept settling down he could not hesitate.

"Perhaps they will not understand me," thought he; "but they will believe me a spy bringing news, and they will come and save me."

The danger was in showing himself and becoming a target until they determined to capture the boat. His reasoning was faulty, because the enemy might not have any boat to bring in the prize, and, in this case, Valnoir could not hope they would swim to him to help him out. On the contrary, it was probable that a Frenchman in a mess would not be a disagreeable sight. But Valnoir had no choice. He remarked, however, that there was no firing from the French shore which appeared deserted here-

abouts. Much farther down the other side of the island, along the front of Billancourt, the shooting went on, but not well sustained.

"Now's my time," thought Valnoir, who began shouting at his loudest : "A friend ! a friend ! save me !"

He took the precaution to lie extended upon the seats so as to have some protection, in case the Germans greeted him with another salvo. They were less ferocious this time ; they did not fire, but they drew near. Valnoir heard them very distinctly talking and laughing behind the trees on the bank. He could not understand what they said, but by instinct guessed that they were finding amusement in his distress and would let him perish. The water had almost come up to the level of the gunnel, and the skiff would go under at any moment. Régine's mantle had come away from the leak, and was again floating on the surface. The sight reminded Valnoir of the cause of the luckless adventure, but at the same time inspired him with an idea. Made of buoyant wood, the skiff found its level under the double weight of the passenger and the entering water, but without his weight it would keep up. Incapable of crossing the river by swimming, Valnoir might do it with the boat as a support, and he conceived a project as wise as it was bold.

Since he had called out for aid, the state of things became plain. Evidently the Germans would neither kill him nor save him ; it was better sport to see him struggle on till he collapsed. To avoid their shots, he ought to seem to drown. The darkness did not allow a long view. By simulating the movement of a choking man, Valnoir might hope to escape the pitiless Teutons. He lost no time in carrying out his scheme. He began by rolling up Régine's cloak ; one of the ends of which he knotted around the shattered prow and with the other made a belt for himself. This bond attached him firmly to the skiff, and might have led to his going to the bottom with it ; but in rising abruptly, Valnoir gave it a side and downward push which turned it clean over. This act had the double advantage of emptying it of water so that it floated keel up, and of making the Prussians believe the fun was over.

The man himself was quit with a short submersion. When he came up to the surface he felt the mantle draw him like a tow-line, and all he had to do, not to go down again, was to lay one hand on the skiff and paddle away with the other and his lower limbs. The split bark which had been so near sinking, now became a supporter and a defender, for it floated betwixt him and the foes. The latter hailed the disaster with a roar of laughter, executed with the unanimity characterising all the German manœuvres. Undoubtedly, they believed the Frenchman fairly and surely swallowed up, and they celebrated the catastrophe in their own way. This was precisely what Valnoir wished, and he complimented himself upon his trick and began to recover confidence in a slight degree. The turned-up boat floated away gently, and left the danger behind every moment. The whole thing now was to keep in the channel, and, though he was a poor swimmer, he could still influence the course by skilful movements. Like his hopes, his eyes turned towards the French bank, silent, but perchance not so untenanted as it looked. More than once he had seen a stir in the rushes on the edge. Besides, two or three hundred yards below, the Seine took a turn, and at this point an intermittent light sparkled among the trees.

"There are our outposts," thought Valnoir ; "if I could only land there I should be all right."

He tried to deviate the skiff to the side where safety was certain. But then he perceived that his legs were stiffening, and that he had a new and more dangerous foe to contend with, cold, to wit. It was the beginning of autumn, and the temperature of the water was endurable; but in throwing himself into the stream after a hearty meal and a long walk, followed by vivid emotions, Valnoir experienced a chill with direful consequences. He sought to act more forcibly, and only paralysed himself the sooner. Then he confined himself to keeping afloat, no easy matter, as the weight of his saturated clothes burdened him extremely. His left hand, grasping the sternboard, became more and more tired, and he had the utmost pain to preserve his hold.

"I am lost if I do not touch land within a quarter of an hour," he muttered.

It would take about that time to reach the headland, where he expected to find French soldiers. There remained just that single chance, when all at once Valnoir felt a strong shock: the skiff was suddenly stopped. The rolled-up cloak which linked him to the boat had caught upon a post in the river. The natural effect was to separate Valnoir from the boat, and drag him away on one side of the obstacle, whilst the boat was carried on the other. He was retained by the fastening of his own contrivance. By a supreme effort he succeeded in going up the cloak hand over hand; he grasped the post which jutted out hardly a foot above the water's surface; but the effort exhausted him. He felt the chill which palsied his legs creep little by little up to his heart.

Soon his mind was affected, and his feelings were strange. Recollections came thronging on his brain, forgotten scenes of youth or childhood, of the happy times when he did not edit the "*Serpentcau*," and did not know *Rose de Charmière*. Then physical pain attacked him, and his breast was transpierced with an acute pang. His body seemed numbed, and, sleep slowly overwhelming him, he felt this was death and he closed his eyes.

XVIII.

VALNOIR was almost in a death swoon, but his clenched hands still clung to the post with a drowning man's convulsive energy. He was recalled to his senses by a sharp pain—while gradually slipping down, a nail in the pile had torn his flesh. On opening his eyes he perceived that the knot had become undone, and the boat was drifting away. The detached mantle remained rolled round his waist, but the other end was floating. He still heard the German voices, probably merrily commenting on the wreck they had witnessed. They had ceased firing, and Valnoir concluded that they no longer saw him, but he also felt that his powers would speedily fail him altogether. His sufferings were intolerable.

Before letting go his hold and sinking, he flung a desperate glance on the right bank. It was France—it was safety, and the wretch grieved that he should die for want of strength to swim for five minutes. By one of those rapid evolutions produced in exceptional moments, his mind overran all the sinister events leading him to this horrible end, and the dying Saint-Senier's pallid face appeared as in a dream. Valnoir, reared by a simple and pious mother, but early entangled in literary Bohemia, had long since forgotten his childhood's creed, save a faint belief in the just reward of human actions in this world.

"I have killed a man and I deserve to die," he muttered, lifting his eyes heavenward, "and there is a God who recompenses and who punishes."

Then appeared his father, whom he had barely known, and who had fallen on the barricades of June, 1848, and the dogma of fatality, to which unbelievers almost always rally, made him look forward to a violent death likewise.

"It was fated!" thought Valnoir as he gradually slipped down into the depths.

He gazed for the last time around him by way of farewell to life. The frame of the death scene would have suited a melodrama. The west wind had risen, and the stars were veiled by the clouds racing over his head. The Seine had a leaden hue, and nothing troubled the stillness save the great guns of Mount Valérien fired at long intervals, for the fusillade had entirely ceased below the isle, and the Prussians were done laughing on the left bank. So deep was the calm that a very faint and distant sound struck Valnoir, his senses having acquired the fineness of perception in nerves superexcited by danger. It came from the right shore.

He made a final effort to keep above the water, and attentively gazed where he believed he had heard a dull splash. A scarcely visible black speck stood out on the slaty river face, smooth as a mirror. Valnoir's heart ached at the thought that help was coming and all too late. He felt weakening, and could not rise to see any more. The speck approached, and his ears distinctly caught a faint, regular sound. He could no longer doubt that somebody, a Frenchman doubtlessly, was carefully swimming towards him. Another minute yet, and he might escape the dreadful doom, but he was not sure exhaustion would grant him that minute more. A terrible cramp wrung his stiffened limbs, and though he drove his nails into the post, his hands could not support the weight of his body.

"Hold fast!" said the swimmer's guarded voice as he came on with surprising speed.

Valnoir actually tried to hold on by his teeth, too, but his contracted jaws could not seize the post; his hands opened, and he was just gliding under when a vigorous hand gripped his shoulder and kept his head out of the water.

"Draw a breath, and rest on me," said the timely comer in an undertone.

But the drowning man, recovering strength in his joy, clung to the deliverer's neck with desperate force.

"Not that way—you'll choke me," said the voice; "extend your body and only lay your hands on my shoulder."

But Valnoir did not seem to hear, and to be free of this dangerous clutch, the stranger was obliged to push him off violently. Valnoir began beating the water wildly with both hands and would infallibly have drowned, if his befriender had not placed him in a vertical position. Then he began to get more self-possessed; his eyes opened, his oppressed breast swelled with air and he exhaled a long sigh of relief.

"Place yourself as I told you and leave the rest to me," ordered the stranger.

"Oh, thanks, thanks!" gasped Valnoir, suffocated by emotion more than anything else.

"Be quick," continued the voice; "we have no time to waste; I fear we have been seen."

He was only too right. The noise of the short scuffle had attracted the

Germans' attention, and a shot was fired from the bank. It skipped along the river ten yards from the post.

"They're bad shots, but we'd better make haste," said the rescuer, tranquilly.

This time Valnoir did not require the invitation to be repeated. Without delaying to cast off Régine's mantle, he did "the dead man's float" on the water with both hands on the swimmer's back, who set to clearing the current with incredible strength and skill. As well as the gloom would let it be judged, he was a young man, and he had not spent much time in doffing his garments ere diving into the Seine, for he had a woollen shirt on. Valnoir had not been able to scan his features, but the voice made a singular impression upon him. It did not seem altogether unknown, and he tried to recall under what circumstances he must have heard it, but his head was too dizzy for him to collect his thoughts.

The state of things was still not conducive to calm reflection, for the peril had only changed in nature. Attracted by the sentinel's shot, the Germans had returned into ambush in the willows, and opened a sustained fire on the pair. The night was too dark for their aim to be precise, but whizzings as frequent as unpleasant reminded Valnoir that his life hung on a thread.

"Courage!" the other kept saying now and anon, "we are getting on."

In point of fact, the right bank stood out sharp, and the wrecked man, who did not lose sight of it, already believed he saw human figures moving among the trees. Proportionately to his proximity to the ardently-desired land, Rose's lover took courage, but he also wondered into what hands his good star had placed him, and how he was to explain his strange adventure. He could reasonably set down his saviour as a soldier, since at such an hour and under an enemy's fire, a suburban resident was not likely to be sauntering along the Seine. The outpost was not far, and Valnoir must expect to be interrogated by the officer in command. Under the mania of seeing a spy in everybody which flourished at the beginning of the siege, the affair was likely to turn out badly. A sharp whizz, the sharpest he had yet heard, interrupted his anticipations. A bullet had passed quite near him, and he thought his rescuer winced.

"Are you hurt, sir?" he inquired, with an emotion the more sincere as his life was closely allied to that of the other.

"Nothing to speak of," replied the latter, striking out smartly with his right hand.

Only a few strokes separated them now from land, and he attained it without too much difficulty.

"Blaze away now, my hearties!" he shouted on getting foothold.

A heavy volley responded to his order, and all were not wasted of the bullets, it might be conjectured, as a howl of pain arose from the other shore. Valnoir was also on land, but his fictitious energy, hitherto sustaining him, vanished as soon as he was on his feet; his sight was dim; and his legs yielded under him, so that he staggered like a drunken man.

"Help him along into the guardhouse," said his rescuer to the soldiers who came from cover.

Valnoir was not wrong in his surmise: these were regulars.

"But you yourself, lieutenant," inquired one of the soldiers, stepping up to sustain him, "I hope they haven't hit you?"

"Yes, they have winged me, but there's no need of a surgeon for it. You can dress it yourself, my good old Landreau," said the lieutenant, shaking his left arm.

"Hurry on to the Red House then," said the soldier, "because wounds are like soup, my lieutenant, none the better for being allowed to cool."

Valnoir let himself be taken away by two men, who slung their rifles across their backs, and helped him along. The darkness did not permit his recognizing the uniforms or the lieutenant, but he was so happy at feeling terra firma under his feet that he recked little of the consequences of his misadventure. But the wet had chilled him, and whilst he was hatching a plausible tale, he hastened on in the hope of warming himself at the watch-fire. The bank rose steeply before sloping down to the road, on the edge of which stood a house with one shining window. The officer followed the party, which only had a score of paces to take before reaching the door of the rather well situated post, since it was not perceptible from the right bank. Valnoir was the first to enter a hall where a bright fire burned in a broad chimney-place. Eager to dry himself, he ran to it, and turned to present his back to the flame. This movement put him face to face with the officer, who recoiled in amazement. Rescuer and rescued had recognized each other.

XIX.

BEFORE Valnoir stood one of the seconds in his duel at Saint-Germain—Lieutenant Roger de Saint-Senier. So great was his dismay, that he nearly fell back into the fire. To owe his life to a man who had a terrible reason to hate him mortally, was a surprise beyond all the newswriter's expectation, and, so far as his pride was concerned, he would have done better to have fallen into the power of the Prussians. The officer's astonishment was no less, and his face at once assumed an expression of haughty repugnance, which wounded the other to the quick.

Saint-Senier was tall, slender, and fair; his regular features showed a finish and softness almost feminine, and his budding moustache did not indicate more than two or three-and-twenty, but his clear blue eyes, of singular quickness, gave his juvenile countenance a remarkable glow of courage and audacity. He was wearing the Garde Mobile red-striped blue trousers, and a white woollen undershirt. For the swim he had cast off his uniform overcoat, but had not taken time to remove his buff knee-high boots. He stood a little aloof from Valnoir, whose person offered a marked contrast with his.

The editor of the "*Serpenteau*" was a very dark man, of medium stature; the worn lines of his wearied, bony face, rather indicated passion than energy. Anyone would have thought him ten years older than Saint-Senier, and yet he was not over thirty. To the observant, the pair represented two opposite types often brought in contact by the hazards of the siege: the well-born, country-bred youth from the rustic circle, whose influence moderates the mind and fortifies the character, and the collegian flung into the militant life of great cities, where illusions are quickly changed for vices. They judged one another as hostile races do at first glance, and their reciprocal antipathy shone in their crossing gaze. In this mute contest, Valnoir was at a disadvantage, for he could not forget that Saint-Senier had snatched him from certain death by generously flying to his rescue. To thank him, he was forced to break the icy silence following their surprise; yet, before speaking, he tried to mend the thread of events in his mind. Whilst endeavouring to explain all that filled the early part

of this night of many casualties, Valnoir prepared a grateful speech for his rescuer, but had much difficulty to invent one. The entrance of a subaltern drew him from the quandary.

"Let's have a squint at that scratch o' your'n, lieutenant," said one of two soldiers, approaching Saint-Senier.

The man thus tendering his chirurgical services wore the so-called *moblot* uniform, but he had long passed the age of service for the garde mobile, or even the army. Short, dried up, and thin, though broad-shouldered and well built, this singular soldier had a long face, a hawk nose, and short, grey moustaches. His brown, wrinkled skin denoted a life spent out of doors, and his small brown eyes sparkled with vivacity and intelligence.

"Fie, M. Roger," said this volunteer surgeon, turning up the blood-stained left-hand sleeve of his officer, "I told you it was folly to make yourself a butt for those rascally Prussians, to say nothing of the chance of catching a cold, and all for the Lord knows who—"

"I told you it was a mere nothing, my good old Landreau," muttered the wounded man, who made less of the wound and its treatment than Valnoir.

"It is true the bullet has not carried away much flesh with the skin," commented the soldier, who was examining the furrow like a judge of such matters, "but it's too much anyhow. You will have plenty of chances to get shot on dry land without hunting after them in the middle of the river. What a jolly good idea it was of mine to join your regiment! The poachers round Saint-Senier may kill a few bucks the more, while I am not at hand to catch them, but at any rate I am looking after you, M. Roger, and Mademoiselle Renée will say that I was right to swap my keeper's game-bag for a cartridge-box."

At the name of Renée, which awakened more than one recollection, Valnoir could not suppress a nervous start, and the officer frowned.

"Let me tell you, M. Roger, that Mademoiselle Renée will not be pleased with this," resumed Landreau, who had taken a strip of linen from his pocket, and was proceeding to bind up the wound.

"All right, old man, look sharp," said the lieutenant impatiently.

"And if you go and get shot" pursued the old gamekeeper, "who would be left to look after my poor young mistress now the master has been killed? Ugh! if I had only been by at that cursed duel, the brigand who brought him down would never have got back into Paris alive—I'd have knocked him on the head like a mad cur!"

Valnoir turned white and checked the pretty speech on his lips; it seemed an ill moment to thank his preserver.

"I shall not want you any more now," said M. de Saint-Senier quickly; "I shall stay by the fire with this gentleman who has the same need as I of a warm. Get back to the waterside with your comrade and keep the lads from wantonly showing themselves."

"Hump! if they don't do so more than their officer," granted the privileged servant. "Anyhow, M. Roger, if you should want me, you know I shall not be far off," he added, glancing at Valnoir not very encouragingly.

"Be easy; if I want you, I will blow my whistle twice."

Upon this assurance, Landreau decided to go forth with the other soldier, and just before he closed the door, he repeated

"Mind you don't forget I am at hand,"

For the first time, Valnoir and the officer were left alone. The latter, whilst his old keeper attended to his wound, had taken a seat near the fireplace on one of the few stools which formed with a long table all the furniture of the guardroom. Lighted by only one window, it had probably been the kitchen of the hapless house, whose site had been doomed by the fate of war and whose tenants had hasted away. After relieving himself of the mantle girdle by throwing it on the table, Valnoir took a place on the other side of the hearth and, as he had had the time to prepare himself, began without too much embarrassment the delicate dialogue to which he was condemned by circumstances.

"I owe my life to you, sir," he said warmly, "and I am happy it should be so. If I have been slow to thank you, it was because I did not wish to allude before your soldiers to the mournful events which proceeded this evening's encounter. But now we are by ourselves, allow me to express at the same time with my gratitude the excessive and sincere grief caused me by the issue of that fatal duel."

"Quite useless, sir," interrupted the officer; "I can accept neither your proffered thanks nor the regret you express, and I am bound to remind you that you owe me satisfaction."

"Owe you, sir! you who have just saved me," ejaculated Valnoir.

"I claimed it on the ground an instant before the combat," continued M. de Saint-Senier coldly, "and you know that circumstances prevented a second encounter. I could not fight you because the Prussians were coming up, and you know that to escape them we had to make use of the conveyance of that showman whom chance brought thither."

"I remember the past perfectly," quickly returned the journalist; "but I have not seen M. Podensac since, hence I am still ignorant how that unfortunate journey terminated, and I beg to ask you—"

"Will you be good enough to inform me when and where I may meet you, sir?" inquired the officer, without heeding the question.

Valnoir had not foreseen the turn the colloquy would take, and was very poorly prepared to discuss the possibility of a duel with his preserver; but, on the other hand, he was glad enough to escape the obligation to narrate his adventures. The idea even came to him to profit by M. de Saint-Senier's bellicose mood to keep the conversation on a bye track to the end. If it were to be prolonged all night, this would be difficult; but Valnoir reckoned on the necessities of outpost duty abridging the interview.

"Sir," said he with sad firmness, "I have a reason for not fighting with you which all brave men will value; and, besides, I have never personally injured you."

"You insulted the name I bear," cried the officer.

"Newspaper polemics led me into vehement language which I have bitterly regretted," replied Valnoir.

Saint-Senier tossed up his hand in token of indifference.

"But I vow to you, sir, that I would never have consented to that fatal affair had I had the honour of your acquaintance and that of your family."

"So you refuse to fight?" demanded the officer.

Valnoir was making ready an evasive answer: but he had no time to utter it, for M. de Saint-Senier had suddenly sprung up with gleaming eyes, and hand extended over Régine's mantle.

XX.

VALNOIR comprehended, and he turned pale also. The mantle was made of coarse stuff woven in some bazaar of Smyrna or Cairo, and Oriental fancy had adorned it with two gold tassels that made it readily recognizable. Once having seen it on the wearer, no one could mistake the strange vestment. The officer was so enwrapped in vengeful thoughts recalled by the unexpected meeting with his cousin's murderer, that he had not paid any attention to the journalist's singular waist-band. But chance had drawn his eyes to the table, and he had risen as if under an electric shock.

"Where did you find this mantle, sir?" he queried, in a voice tremulous with wrath.

The waif picked up by Valnoir aroused such moving memories in the lieutenant that he suddenly forgot the duel he was foreing on his adversary. Taken unawares by the dangerous question, Rose's cavalier was in no haste to answer. He was trying to reconstruct the framework of falsehood so laboriously designed, but, in his perplexity, found all stories unacceptable.

"Explain it! justify yourself!" cried the officer, more menacingly than ever.

Saint-Senier's was the cool anger of Northerners, and the question promptly restored his self-possession.

"You are right, sir," he said, taking his seat again, "and I was wrong to give way to passion. It is I who will clearly explain myself, and I request you for your own sake to reply as frankly."

The provoker suddenly changed into an examining magistrate, and Valnoir needed only one glance to understand that things were becoming serious. The officer would not waste questions about Régine's mantle before avenging his kinsman's death, unless he had powerful motives to interest himself in the girl. It was necessary for Valnoir to keep on his guard, and he bore himself accordingly.

"Sir," said his preserver, eyeing him steadily, "a while ago I was watching on the river banks when I heard calls for help in our tongue. My men wanted to hold me back from rescuing the person in peril, but I could not abandon a fellow-countryman. I jumped into the water, and succeeded in saving you from the twofold danger you ran."

"I have not forgotten the service you rendered me," cried Valnoir, fervently; "and I am always ready to prove my gratitude."

"Be so good as not to interrupt and hear me to the end," observed Saint-Senier, without emotion. "I did not know the man I rescued; he might have been a deserter or a spy."

Valnoir shook his head indignantly.

"I said 'might have been,'" continued the officer, coolly; "I might have said probably: 'Who but a spy or a deserter, in fact, would be crossing the Seine at night in face of a Prussian picket?' I have no reason to conceal from you that I intended to question you closely after I had fished you out. But when I recognized you by this firelight, I could see in you nothing but the mortal enemy of all who bear my name; and I own I thought of avenging our family honour before thinking of my duty as a soldier."

Here he paused an instant to find the fittest expressions to reproduce his thoughts exactly.

"Now it convenes with my mood," he went on sternly, "to remember I

am on outpost duty, and to ask you to account for your actions this night."

Valnoir had had time to get his defence ready and adopt a course.

"Just as you please, sir," he said, in the tone of an honest man unjustly accused.

"Where do you come from, then?" demanded the officer, taking no notice of the indignant tone which the other believed seemly.

"From Paris."

"The gates are shut at seven. How did you get through?"

"In a boat."

"Where did you take it?"

"Near the Outer Circle Railway Bridge."

"And you were able to get through the dam which is strictly guarded?"

"It seems so," replied Valnoir, curtly. "It is true I was fired on from the networks, but I was not hit."

"Very well; where were you going?"

"Nowhere."

"I warn you," proceeded M. de Saint-Senier with freezing coldness, "that if you refuse to be plain with me, I have perfectly decided to send you to the commander of this district, who will no doubt find out some means to make you speak."

"I have told you the truth," returned Valnoir, undismayed; "I did not know whither I was going, because I had no means of directing the boat I was in."

"You are playing on words, sir, and I have no time to trifle away. Why did you take the boat?"

"To save a person's life," was the journalist's plain answer, for he had hit on a plausible story.

"Whose life?" inquired the lieutenant, with an eagerness in contrast with his previous sternness.

"A woman's."

The answer told, for M. de Saint-Senier's emotion could not be hidden.

"Then this—this mantle?" he qucried agitatedly.

"Belonged to her; I picked it up floating on the river and kept it in the hope it would serve to reveal the name of the poor victim of an act of despair."

The officer buried his face in his hands, and Valnoir took good care not to let this occasion slip of interesting and softening his foe.

"Since you no longer examine me, sir," said he with well-assumed softness, "I am ready to relate to you all the incidents of the sad story."

The other raised his head. He was pale and he made visible efforts to hide his emotion.

"Speak, sir," he said more gently.

"I was alone on the Quai d'Auteuil," pursued Valnoir, "whither I was brought by a—a visit to a friend, when I was passed by a woman running to the river. Her wild aspect as well as her hurried steps made me think she was bent on suicide. I followed her and saw that I had divined only too truly. She flung herself into the Seine—I had unfortunately arrived too late."

"Did you not try to save her?" asked the officer quickly.

"It was through trying to save her that I nearly lost my life," rejoined the editor quietly; he was coming out nicely. "I did not know how to swim as you noticed, for you had to rescue me," continued he, glancing at

the lieutenant. "So I did the only thing in my power—I unfastened a boat and tried to overtake the poor woman who had risen to the surface. Unhappily I saw her no more; her cloak was floating about though and that I picked up. You know the rest."

In this artfully arranged tale the narrator had taken care to leave out all that could injure him and to equip himself with an honourable part. Hence he avoided mention of his persecution of Régine on whom he had forced his company, and so he hoped to win the officer's good feelings. This latter point was important, for Rose de Charmière's lover had no more desire to fight him than to go before a drumhead court. He had no fear of the poor girl giving him the lie, for he had seen her sink into the depths of the Seine.

"Upon my word," he thought, "I believe that I shall get out of this silly adventure better than I hoped."

"Did you not know this woman?" demanded M. de Saint-Senier, seeming to hesitate about further questioning.

"Never saw her before," replied Valnoir with rare impudence. Almost instantly reading doubt in his hearer's eyes, he hastened to add: "Besides, even had I met her before, which I do not believe, I could not have recognised her from the night being rather dark. I did not see her face and could still less trace her features."

"Did not her dress strike you?" persisted the officer.

"Why no—I scarcely noticed it, or anything more than this mantle," returned the editor with less assurance, for the other's continuing to question him surprised him.

"Sir," resumed the lieutenant, "I believe you utter the truth, but I am obliged to state that you had previously seen the girl who was drowned under your eyes."

"I—I did not think so," stammered Valnoir, rather taken aback.

"I am going to remind you of the serious circumstances under which you met her," said M. de Saint-Senier laying stress on the words.

"I will thank you to do so," muttered the journalist, rising to elude the other's clear, fixed gaze. "Excuse me, but the fire is too hot," he added to cover his retreat; and further to give himself countenance, he paced the room and stepped towards the solitary window looking on the river. His head was burning, and he was going to press his brow against the cold panes when he thought he spied a human form beyond. Nor was he wrong. A pair of bright eyes were watching him.

XXI.

THE night was dark and the dazzle of the fire he had lately left prevented Valnoir clearly distinguishing external objects. The human form, of which he had caught a glimpse, vanished before he had time to discern so fugitive an apparition. So he believed it was some too inquisitive soldier, and heeded no more the shadowy shape which only for the moment interested him. Saint-Senier had not turned and was waiting for the answer which the other was in no haste to give him.

"I repeat to you, sir," he said slowly, "that you did previously see this dead woman. Her costume, anyway, was sufficiently odd to attract your attention, and it is strange at least that you should not have recollected her."

"Oh, are you speaking of the girl who accompanied that mountebank in the Forest of Saint-Germain?" queried the author with a deceptive air of surprise.

"I am indeed," replied the officer, rising to have his adversary on a level.

"Oh, then this is fatality!" ejaculated the journalist, who had recovered full self-possession.

His accent of sincerity would have honoured a finished comedian, and without suspecting it, Valnoir must have gained by Madame de Charrière's lessons.

"But, though I did not remember her, she might have remembered me," he continued, to anticipate an objection.

"So I think," was the other's cold answer.

A rather long break ensued, Valnoir had resumed his stool, and toasted himself at the fire, forgetting in his concern that he had complained of the heat of this same fire kindled by the faithful Landreau. The officer had lapsed into a brown study, and seemed pursuing an idea he hesitated to express.

"Sir, I am going to speak frankly," he said suddenly.

The other bowed by way of thanks.

"Your tale would pass muster with anybody but myself," proceeded the lieutenant, "but I must say that it is impossible for me to accept it wholly."

"Why so, please?" demanded the journalist, feeling bound to pretend indignation.

"Because that girl could not have had suicidal thoughts, on the contrary, she had potent reasons to cling to life."

"Who can tell? A fit of despair! disappointed love!" interrupted Valnoir, shrugging his shoulders.

"I beg you not to slander her," returned Saint-Senier, haughtily. "She had a mission to fulfil, and would not have failed in it by willingly throwing away her life. Hence her death remains inexplicable to me, and until I learn the true cause, you must remain my prisoner."

"The deuce! that may be for long," said Valnoir, mockingly again, "and, great though be my gratitude, it does not go so far as to bind me to pass my life in the outer lines beside my rescuer."

"Do you prefer my taking you before a court that will ask you what you were doing on the Seine at such an hour?"

"A court, under a siege," uttered Valnoir lightly.

"The court of a judge who wears a sword, and who condemns without appeal—the provost-marshal of the army."

The journalist lost colour slightly, but remained under self-control, not believing the game lost yet. One word had struck him in the threatening speech, and he sought to win with that.

"Sir," he said calmly, "you spoke of a mission entrusted to that girl; I am ignorant of its nature."

"Twas to come here to me this evening," explained the lieutenant.

"Very well," went on Valnoir, who was able to conceal his surprise; "it seems to me then that, with that piece of information and others besides, which you can no doubt furnish him, your military magistrate will have no trouble in discovering the facts. Hence I am ready to give an account of myself before him."

Rose's lover would have been sorely put about, had his offer been

snapped up, but he surmised that his mortal foe would think twice before giving this matter the publicity of a court-martial hearing. The other's manner showed him that he had not beguiled himself, for the lieutenant bit his lips in silence as if he regretted having spoken too much. Valnoir took the moment as favourable to strike a decisive blow.

"Truth to tell, sir," he went on, skilfully managing the inflections of his voice, "I am of opinion that we are both going astray. I refused you satisfaction by arms, which I do not believe due to a man who has just saved my life. Now you threaten to arrest me for a crime not committed by me. Better, I take it, to settle between ourselves hereafter what has no pressing solution. I cannot leave Paris, even were I so inclined, since the investment is complete, so that you are sure to find me here whenever you like, and I give you my word of honour to be at your call in case you persist in claiming a meeting."

The garde mobile was walking up and down in agitation.

"As for the mysterious event of this night," continued the news-writer, "I wish it enlightened as much as yourself, and if the publicity of which I dispose can be of any use to you—"

"Sir," interrupted the officer, cutting him short, "I desire, quite otherwise, that everybody shall remain ignorant of what has happened, and if I accept your word, it is on condition that you hold your peace. You may go back to Paris to-morrow morning, but I rely on your pledge, and I shall send two friends to call on you as soon as my company is relieved of its duty."

He had not without some effort decided to defer a duel irrevocably determined on in his mind, and as the view of his destined opponent seemed hateful, he went and sat down at the other end of the table with his back turned on Valnoir. Not wishful at all to prolong the dialogue, the latter determined to make the most of the opportunity.

"Day will not be long before breaking," he said, moving towards the door, "and if you have nothing more to say to me, I will go on the road and wait for the drawbridge to be let down."

"You are at liberty, sir," was the cold rejoinder.

The other did not ask a repetition of the permission, and he was on the point of going out when the door opened.

"Régine!" exclaimed M. de Saint-Senier, who had looked round at the sound.

Madame de Charmière's protector bounded back in amazement as well as terror. Before him stood the girl he believed drowned, clothed as on the day of the duel, and the apparition revolutionised all his ideas. He recoiled as from a spectre, but Régine did not seem to notice him as she walked straight up to the officer, who quivered with joy and emotion, and handed him a letter.

"Alive!" muttered he, pressing her hands. "You are alive! But how did you escape death—who saved you? Pshaw! I forget she cannot hear me," he added, with a toss of the head at his blunder.

But Régine must have divined the question by the flutter of the lips, for she pantomimed the action of swimming with her arms. Valnoir began to understand.

"She can swim, and she took to the water just to escape me," he thought; "and it nearly cost me dear to jump in after her."

"But why did you run such a danger?" resumed M. de Saint-Senier,

bringing the girl to a seat at the fire, for her garments were streaming with wet. "Why did Renée send you so late?"

Régine proved again that she heard with her eyes, for she laid a finger on her lips and darted a rapid glance at the bystander.

"Oho!" thought the latter, "she comes on an errand from Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier. To-morrow I shall find out all about this affair."

By a pantomime still more expressive than words, the dumb girl motioned to the officer that he ought to read the letter she had delivered to him. With an unsteady hand he broke a broad black seal, on which the very sharp eyes of the editor recognized a coat of arms. As the young guardsman read his face brightened, but when he finished tears flowed down his cheeks. Régine watched the play of his features with impassioned attention.

"Thank you, thank you," he said, cordially, "but I beg you not to expose your life in this way. In a few days I can go away. I shall be able to see them, to—"

The girl reminded him by a touch that Valnoir was still present. The latter thought that he would not learn much more by listening to monologues which Régine checked whenever they got interesting.

"I must be going, sir," he said, quietly, "but first allow me to express my joy at seeing safe and sound again a person in whom you are highly interested, and—"

The girl's eyes studied his lips in movement with an earnestness which eventually confused him, and he believed he had better curtail the compliment.

"I am happy to prove my innocence before leaving you," he concluded, with a forced smile.

"I was wrong, sir," returned the officer, gravely, "and I repeat that you are free to go."

Valnoir bowed, and was taking a step forward when Régine sprang up and rushed between him and the door, where she extended her arms to bar his exit.

XXII.

THE incident was well calculated to appal Valnoir. To force his way out was neither easy nor prudent, for the girl's determined air betokened that she would not give way. Besides, the editor of the "Serpenteau" was obliged to play out his part to the end and to appear interested in Saint-Senier's concerns. Moreover, as he had seen the Dumb Girl in "Masaniello," he believed the powers of dumbshow too limited to explain matters except on operative boards.

"However much she flourishes her long arms about and rolls her eyes," he reasoned, "this slasher will never puzzle out that I pursued her from the Madeleine to Auteuil."

Yet the officer seemed much more interested than Valnoir by Régine's action and, approaching, he eyed them alternately.

"Why do you prevent this gentleman leaving?" he inquired, pronouncing his words slowly in order to give the girl time to follow the movements of his lips.

This time, though, Régine did not seem to understand. Madame de Charmiore's lover had drawn away, and she had left the doorway free as if

satisfied with having brought about his remaining. She returned to the fire, and became wrapt in thought, though her eyes did not quit her persecutor, who guessed truly that another attempt at departure would succeed no better than the former.

"This is some jest, no doubt," he said, trying to smile.

"People are in no mood for jesting when lately escaped from death," remarked Saint-Senier, gravely.

"Then, sir," went on the newspaper editor, sternly, "will you kindly put an end to a scene that might be effective on a melodramatic stage, but which seems to me out of place here."

The officer shook his head; it was easily seen that he wavered between the wish to keep his word and the suspicion which Régine's action aroused in his mind.

"Very well," continued Valnoir, "I suppose I must wait till the lady issues my pass."

This jest hit hard.

"Sir," replied the lieutenant, "I have twice already said you were free and I do not in any way oppose your departure; but I know what this young girl's nature is, and I am sure she has a serious motive for detaining you."

"But I cannot ask her it," jeered the journalist.

"She will make it clear, I fear for your sake, sir," muttered the guardsman, offended by the tone.

"The sooner the better, for day is breaking and I have something better to do than to remain at the outposts."

This sentence, most insolently uttered, drove the hearer from the cold reserve in which he had tried to entrench himself. He strode up to his prisoner and looked him in the face, saying:

"There is a simple way of settling this. I have a spare sword. This room is large enough for us to fight it out straight off. If you kill me you can return to Paris in time to scribble fresh libels in your journal."

"Is this—this *lady* to be our second?" ironically inquired Valnoir.

"Just so," coldly replied the garde mobile, going to the corner where his weapons were placed.

Though he had no inclination to run the hazard of another encounter, the editor began to fear there was no avoiding it. At bottom, he had courage enough, at least, not to shrink from the rather forced combat, and, besides, he was strongly tempted by the chance of ridding himself of a rather cumbersome antagonist. Régine did not move, but she watched all the soldier's movements with eyes sparkling with intelligence, clearly and perfectly comprehending what was on foot, and nothing showed that she intended to oppose it. The officer was very busy examining the swords which he had unsheathed, and was trying the points and edges, when quite a brisk firing broke out riverward. The sharp crack of the chassepot rifles was plainly to be distinguished alternating with deeper-toned reports. The noise was very close and the interchange of shots seemed to take place where the drowning man had been brought ashore. Saint-Senier hesitated an instant. One could guess that he was divided between the wish to finish with his adversary and the duty to look after his soldiers. Valnoir deemed it a meet occasion to parade his valour.

"You can go out there, sir," he said with a touch of sarcasm. "I promise to abide your return."

This pledge no doubt appeared scarcely enough to the officer, who,

instead of going to the door, opened the window and quickly blew a whistle hanging from his neck twice. "Prudence is the mother of safety," observed Valnoir loud enough to be heard by M. de Saint-Senier, who was turning to come to him when Landreau's face appeared at the window.

But the ex-gamekeeper did not trouble to look in.

"It's nothing, M. Roger," he said in a calm tone—"only that big lout Tournois, son of the farmer of La Bretèche, who was fool enough to show himself on the bank. The Prussians caught sight of him and they are playing an overture to Old Nick on their clarionets."

"Nobody hit?" queried the lieutenant.

"Not a scratch," answered Landreau, snapping his fingers; "they will draw blank," the clumsy beggars!"

"Good! go back, and call me if matters become serious."

"All right, M. Roger, we'll keep our eye skinned," said the old gamekeeper, departing.

His officer shut the window and returned to the swords.

"For the last time, sir," remonstrated Valnoir, "I must point out that a duel is senseless under such a state of things."

As he spoke, he glanced at Régine, expecting her to intervene; but to his great surprise she did not make a move, and he judged aright that the preliminaries of the duel did not at all alarm her.

"I little care," responded the officer; "I am determined to have done with you this very night."

"Suppose I refuse?" suggested the man of letters, folding his arms.

"If you do, I shall know how to force you."

He emphasized his retort with so menacing a gesture that his hearer felt that there could be no drawing back. The officer dragged the table on one side in the centre, and came forward to present the two cavalry swords, hilts foremost. Régine looked on without evincing the faintest feeling. She was as immovable as a statue, and her look was that of a sleep-walker. The gun shots did not cease, and it looked more and more like an engagement. Valnoir took one blade and was about pulling off his coat when the panes were smartly rapped upon.

"Lieutenant," cried a soldier to his officer who threw up the window.

"Landreau sent me to tell you that we have two men wounded already, and the Prussians seem like attempting to cross."

"I am coming," answered the officer, vexedly. "Will you follow me, sir?" he added, turning round to the editor of the "Serpenteau."

The latter hesitated an instant, but feeling that it was important to be free from Régine, he boldly answered that he was ready; and to gild his consent with heroism he added:

"Let me have a gun so as to be some good. I would rather be killed by the Prussians than by you."

"Be it so," said the other, buckling on his belt.

He was going forth with his volunteer, who was rejoicing over this unexpected issue, when the girl rose, and touched his arm gently.

"What's the matter, Régine?" he asked.

She pointed to Valnoir, and shook her head as much as to say:

"I do not want him to go away."

Very much surprised, M. de Saint-Senier tried to proceed, but she held him with an energy announcing a deeply fixed resolve.

"Régine, my child, I must go," remonstrated the officer softly, for the fusillade seemed approaching

"Sir," said Valnoir, "we are losing time, and, if you will believe me, we should leave the young lady here."

"Farewell, Régine!" shouted the lieutenant, rushing towards the doorway.

She barred the passage in the same way as she had already done to Valnoir, but this time, with a movement as swift as thought, she drew a paper out of her dress body, and held it out to the officer.

"Wretch!" cried he, after having rapidly perused it, at the same time taking a step towards the editor, who beheld the incident in stupefaction.

But simultaneously the door was dashed open, and the old gamekeeper leaped into the room.

"M. Roger," he faltered almost breathlessly, "the Prussians! They have crossed the Seine! We shall be overpowered!"

Out sprang M. de Saint-Scnier, and as Régine could not detain him, she followed him, clinging to his clothes.

The war-cries and the firing redoubled in violence. The bewildered Valnoir was puzzled whether to stay or go, when his eyes fell on the paper which the amazed officer had dropped upon the table. He caught it up in a tremulous hand and read it. These words were written on it in a bold, clear, and steady hand:

"This man and his accomplice murdered your cousin."

XXIII.

LIKE most literary men, Valnoir lived on the hill of the Saint-Georges district. The "Serpenteau's" golden eggs were too few in number as yet much to enrich its editorial chief, and though he handled goodly sums, and spent no little money, the devotee of Madame de Charmière had not yet ventured on taking his flight into the dearer district around the Madeleine. Since his amour with Rose had become protracted, she had often joked him about his flat in the scarcely aristocratic Rue de Navarin. But as she never set foot there, and as Valnoir anticipated all her whims, she granted the sound logic that the more her admirer restricted his personal expenditure, the more he would have of available funds. The noble sister of Antoine Pilevert possessed marvellously well the art of extracting this ready cash from her lover's pocket-book, and employing it in productive speculations.

Madly smitten, and as reckless as his mistress was careful, Valnoir willingly agreed to this lop-sided arrangement. The result was that this man, who spent three louis on a dinner with Rose at the Café Anglais, and who never went about on foot, still dwelt in lodgings at six hundred francs, and had no other valet than the doorkeeper. At the same time, the journalist's perch in this ward so dear to artists, lacked neither style nor comfort. The windows opened on vast gardens, and the flat was composed of four rooms, tastefully furnished. A man does not live in artistic and literary Bohemia for ten years without picking up many a waif and stray in the celebrated studios and fashionable theatres. The walls of Valnoir's study and sleeping apartment literally disappeared under pictures signed by names of mark, and actress's portraits enriched by signatures which assuredly doubled their value, but almost always cost him dear.

The author's pet room was a smoking snuggery he had had built inexpen-

sively, out at the back, on a terrace belonging to his house and overlooking the next garden.

Idle at times, as men are who indulge to excess in intellectual labours, he had collected writing materials here as well as the smoking appurtenances and the furniture for sleep. An oak table, a sofa covered with Persian cloth, two cane chairs, and pipes of all sizes and kinds, composed the whole furniture of the Nicotinian Temple where only bosom friends penetrated. Here the journalist had shut himself in on the day following his agitated night in and on the Seine. After the skirmish which delivered him of both M. de Saint-Senier and Régine, he had slipped away as quickly as he could from a post so dangerous from every point of view. Without worrying about the shooting and the shouts on both banks of the river, he went up the Point du Jour road briskly, and soon found himself far enough from the scene of action to stop and await in all security for the opening of the gates. After a couple of hours employed in resting after so many shocks, and in meditating, seated on the edge of a ditch, Valnoir saw day break, and he entered into Paris without difficulty amid a long train of market gardeners' carts.

At so early an hour, he could not dream of presenting himself at Madame de Charnière's. Under pretext of conforming with the usages and customs of ultra-high life, the ingenious adventuress had put her lover under the ban never to call on her unexpectedly, and, on this occasion, Valnoir would even less have dared break the taboo from fear of a stormy reproof. He had been too long gone after the cigar to reappear without smoothing down the dame of the Place de la Madeleine, and he contented himself with nodding to the balcony, which had been the starting point overnight of his Odyssey. A cab picked up at Passy carried him to his residence, broken up with fatigue, dissatisfied with himself, and, above all, uneasy about the consequences of his adventure. He had brought away with him the paper which Régine had put before Lieutenant de Saint-Senier to read, and, though he could not understand the enigmatical sentence speaking of a murder and an accomplice, he saw danger in the mystery. Still, he went to bed on arriving at the Rue de Navarin, and lulled himself to sleep with the consoling thought that both officer and show girl had been killed or captured by the Prussians, and so he was rid of them.

On awaking about noon, Valnoir found a note from Madame de Charnière on his side-table: "As you preferred spending the evening away from me, I shall spend the day without you (wrote Rose, who affected the epigrammatic style). You may come round to-morrow at three. Meanwhile, M. Taupier will give you news of me, and speak to you about our plans for 'Lighting our Pipes at the Moon.'" This was neither dated nor signed by reason of a principle of caution in which the upstart never failed; but Valnoir, habituated to such shortcomings, held it as good, and decided readily to pass the day at home. He had arrears of correspondence to clear off: the editing of the "Serpenteau" took place in the morning, and it was too late to send copy: two sound reasons for not going out.

"Taupier will drop in after the 'make-up,'" he said, yawning, "and tell me how they ended the night at Rose's. Oh, here you are, Master Bourignard," he added, on seeing his doorkeeper enter with a tray. "You guessed I should want some tea. This foresight does you honour."

The personage to whom this compliment was addressed reminded one strikingly of the Joseph Prud'homme type. Endowed with an enormous nose and a prominent chin which visibly tended to meet it, Monsieur

Bourignard was the wearer of gold spectacles, momentarily raised on his bald brow. His thin neck was surrounded by a white choker with embroidered ends falling upon the broad lappels of a Robespierre waistcoat. An observer would have been tempted to believe that he tried to imitate the over-neat attire of the too famous lawyer of Arras, for he also wore a high-necked, long-tailed coat of black, with brass buttons such as Robespierre displayed on the day of the Festival to the Supreme Being. This majestic door-keeper had preserved of his own official attire only a blue linen apron, which screened his knock-knee legs, and a Greek cap stuck on the apex of his pointed head.

"Citizen editor," said he in a voice which seemed to come from the hollow of his immense nasal organ, "I am flattered by your homage."

This solemn phrase was accompanied by a bow full of dignity, and the functionary who uttered it prepared to place the tray on the little table.

"Carry it into the smoking-room, noble father, and let nobody come up save M. Taupier," said Valnoir, jumping out of bed.

"'Tis well, citizen editor," rejoined M. Bourignard, gravely; "but I would like you never again to style me a noble father."

"Pooh! Do you really feel regret at resembling the noble old fathers of the heroines in classical tragedies! Why, I was thinking I was paying you a compliment."

"'Tis true I am a father, and proud am I of the name, for my offspring Agricola yields me considerable gratification; yet I am not noble, and I vaunt of that. We were all proletaries from father to son, sir—I mean, citizen."

"Proletaries, eh? I heard you had money in the government funds—"

"I am even more delighted that I am not noble," continued the gold-spectacled porter, "for were I so—"

"If so, you would love the nobility, which would be hard to a man who detests it," suggested Valnoir, bursting into laughter. "Never mind, Bourignard, just put the tea where I bade you—that's better than talking politics."

The door-keeper followed his lodger into the smoking-room, and laid out the breakfast without impairing any of his natural stateliness.

"Excellent news this morning," he said, whilst busy, "and now I think we shall send the hordes of Old William spinning."

"Excellent, my dear Bourignard, excellent! The Prussians crossed the Seine last night, and drove our pickets in under the guns of the forts."

The doorkeeper smiled archly, and bent over to his master's ear.

"It's clear, sir, that you do not know what I do," he whispered, forgetting to citizenise Valnoir.

"What do you know, oh great strategist Bourignard?"

"I know that Gringalet is at the front, and not one of the soldiers of despotism will return to their Vaterland," said the patriotic door-keeper.

"Who is Gringalet?" inquired the journalist, trying to keep serious.

"A ship's gunner, sir, who aims all our great ordnance pieces one after another and never misses a shot. When the Prussians set up a cannon in a battery, Gringalet just fires, and his ball goes smack into the enemy's cannon's mouth! It bursts it, and you see—"

"Plainly, plainly!" said Valnoir, succeeding in not laughing. "Now that we have Gringalet, I do not see what they wanted all the country militiamen for—Gringalet is a host in himself."

"Hence I have had my son Agricola dressed like a sailor," proceeded Bourignard.

"A judicious and patriotic conception!" cried Valnoir, dipping some bread in his tea.

The political work on the "Serpenteau" had not entirely made Rose's lover forget practical joking, in which he diverted himself before he became a knight of the quill, and he felt much inclined to be merry that morning to repel the too serious memories of the night.

"My spouse wished to purchase him a complete uniform of a moblot at the Belle Jardinière clothing establishment," continued the janitor, "but I opposed it because I suspect these military men of bringing retrograde ideas from the provinces. Reaction is raising its head."

"Indeed?" queried Valnoir, dubiously.

"Its head is up, sir, and the streets of Paris are full of these supporters of fendalism. That reminds me, sir, that somebody came after you this morning."

"Who? a garde mobile?"

"Yes, and an officer to boot! he was accompanied by a civilian with the look of a proud aristocrat. I told them that you were not up yet, and they said they would look in this evening or to-morrow."

"Already, him!" muttered Valnoir, becoming moody, "that's strange."

XXIV.

THE citizen doorkeeper Bourignard had no idea of the effect produced by his announcement that a military gentleman had called. The editor, forgetting the night's events to "chaff" his grotesque Figaro, was abruptly reminded of the direful reality. If Lieutenant de Saint-Senier came or sent seconds, it meant that he was decided to follow up the affair of which the mysterious surroundings much worried Valnoir. He had briefly cherished the secret hope that he was freed of the officer and Régine by the Prussian attack on the outpost. Bourignard apprised him that he would still have to face the survivors of the affair.

"Venerable father—of Agricola," he said with a smile, much resembling a wry face, "at present I require your services no further, and I have three articles to write."

"I understand, sir, *sufficit* citizen," remarked this most Jacobin of doorkeepers, "I shall retire to attend to household affairs. If these aristocrats return, what shall I tell them?"

"That I am out," replied Valnoir quickly. "Only let in Taupier, none but Taupier—that's the order of the day."

"With pleasure, sir, with pleasure," said Bourignard on his way out. "Citizen Taupier is a pure radical, and one can but gain in his company."

The journalist lit a pipe on being left alone, stretched himself out on the lounge, and reviewed the dark passages in his rambles.

"What does the strolling player mean here?" he wondered as he took out the paper in which Régine accused him of murder.

In vain did he read and read over and over again this accusation, quite enigmatical—he could make nothing of it.

"My accomplice," he repeated; "none but Taupier can be so designated. Yet it seems to me that whilst I was unfortunate enough to kill that seaman, I killed him in accordance with all the rules. His own second, Podensac,

was there to bear witness to that at need. 'Murderer!' plague on't, how the girl goes on! and that soft-eyed lieutenant swallows such frantic stuff! Pooh!' he added, putting down his pipe, "I am a fool to bother about it. The girl is simply cracked, and I defy the hare-brained fellow to find seconds to assist at the new meeting he proposed."

Satisfied with this soothing reflection, Valnoir rose and laid out paper and ink at the other end of the table on which he had breakfasted. Preparing matter for the "Serpenteau" had been badly neglected during the last twenty-four hours, and he felt the necessity of giving vent to his ill-humour by "pitching into" (we apologize for the orthodox term) his political adversaries. But he was not in the vein that day; before he had scrawled a dozen lines, he perceived that tart expressions did not flow from his pen in the wonted abundance, and that he could not find those ingenious terms and *doubles ententes* of slander which constituted the base of his talent. Rose's wrathful visage glowed through the venomous phrases cast upon the paper, and he finally left unfinished a tirade laboriously and perfidiously polished in order to muse over the overnight's banquet and its remarkable guests. He was asking himself whether he ought to believe in the errand of M. Pilevert and the projects of Alcindor the Fusionist when the corkscrew form of Taupier wriggled in.

"Hilloa! here you are, eh?" he exclaimed, enchanted at the diversion. "I did not expect you so soon."

"Many thanks!" snarled Taupier who did not seem all milk and honey.

"Come, come! don't get cross, but tell me if the paper 'went up' yesterday."

"No, and we shall not go up, so long as the 'Serpenteau' does not plainly stand out as the organ of socialistic ideas—"

"And fusionist, too, eh, whilst we are about it? Have you chanced to take that clown's patter as serious?"

"My dear fellow," said the humpback, settling down to the neck in the cane chair, "you have style and you can properly dress up an article, but you are only a dunce in politics."

"I have always suspected it," answered Valnoir laughing, "since I rejected your romance in five books: 'The Loves of a Workingman.'"

"You made a blunder there," returned the deformity curtly, "but novels are not in question. If you want the paper to go ahead, you must take a line of your own. Now you pepper the reactionary party pretty hotly, but you have no straight line."

"Have you?" queried the other ironically. "I should not think it by looking at you."

This personal allusion was not to the taste of the tortuous Taupier, who resumed with noticeable acerbity:

"If my ideas do not suit you, I shall have no difficulty in publishing them elsewhere, and I have come expressly to learn if you are going to join us?"

"Who, us? the humpbacks of Paris?" interrupted Valnoir impertinently.

"With us the founders of the Light your Pipe at the Moon Society," returned Taupier, without resenting the insult.

The editor of the "Serpenteau" could no longer restrain a roar of laughter, and he leaned back, clapping his hands.

"In the meantime, be good enough to unravel this charade," he said, holding out Régine's writing.

Taupier read it with much attention, but his face only expressed the

astonishment of a man who had an undecipherable hieroglyphic under his eyes.

"Well?" he coldly inquired.

"Well, my dear fellow, that scribble treats us plainly as murderers. The 'man' mentioned is myself, his accomplice is you, and the murdered man is the naval officer killed in the Forest of Saint-Germain."

This elucidation had the power of making the hardened humpback blanch, and inquire with ill-dissembled anxiety: "Whence comes this paper?"

"Too long a story to be told in detail. Know then that this pleasant intelligence was hauded in my presence to M. de Saint-Senier, lieutenant in the Garde Mobile and cousin of that dead man, by a sort of fortune-telling gipsy, an associate of your friends Pilevert and his companion."

"Does he also know?" hissed Taupier, who could not help shuddering.

"What do you mean by 'does he also know?'" repeated Valnoir. "Do you mean to imply that his associates are also all in a plot to accuse me of foul play?"

"Maybe," responded the humpback after a pause.

"Indeed!" cried the exasperated journalist, "and do you, who are called my accomplice, submit to the accusation thus tamely?"

"It seems so," said Taupier coolly, his eyes shining with malevolence.

"Oh, very well, then! do as you please, but I declare to you that I am not going to carry my indifference so far as to let such rascals insult me, and if you leave me in the lurch in this ignoble matter, I shall justify myself single-handed."

"Who says I would do so?"

"Speak then, hang it all!"

"Speak yourself!" cried the humpback. "How can I give you any advice when you do not let me know what happened?"

"I have told you enough; but, anyhow, here is the matter in a nutshell: last evening I met in the street that scarlet witch whom we left the other day in the clearing. I had the foolish idea of following her. She leaped into the river to give me the slip and I was nearly drowned in trying to fish her out."

"You are always committing follies," commented the distorted one.

"In short, we fell into Saint-Senier's hands who was on guard out there. He wanted to force me into fighting him, and I should have had to give in had not the Prussians attacked the post."

"You did get out of it though?"

"Yes; but that crazy girl gave the mad fellow this pretty prose effusion which I brought back. She cannot speak but she can write, as you see. What do you say now of the state of affairs?"

"That the fire-eater and the deaf-mute are, probably, on the road to Germany by now. Our reporter told us this morning that the outpost was carried by the enemy."

"Not a bit of it! This Saint-Senier has just sent me his seconds."

"The devil! did you receive them?"

"No, I was sleeping. But they told Bourignard that they would come back."

"They must not find you."

"How now? upon my word," cried Valnoir, furiously, "any one would think you credit this lunatic's nonsensical accusation. You could not answer otherwise if we had really murdered the officer."

"If I were accused of stealing the towers of Notre-Dame, I should run into hiding," replied the deformed one, sententiously.

"Friend Taupier, you are a dreadful bore, let me tell you," observed the editor, striding up and down the room.

"Do you think you entertain me by telling me all is discovered?"

Valnoir wheeled about and, grasping the speaker by the collar, he spun him round to tell him to his face:

"I know that you are a coward, but I am not of the same mould as they cast Taupiers in, and I fear nobody, mark you! I fear nobody, I say, because if I killed M. de Saint-Senier, I did it fairly."

"Are you quite sure of that?" queried the humpback, with a venomous smile.

XXV.

VALNOIR fell back a step and turned deadly pale.

"What do you mean, wretch?" he faltered, trembling with rage.

"Dear me, nothing much," was the humpback's reply, as he shrugged his shoulders. "I only mean to say that the girl is quite right to accuse you, and that instead of losing your temper, you had far better consider with me the way to parry the thrust."

"But you do not understand! have you not properly read those shameful words?"

"Properly, yes; I know them by heart and I repeat that she says what is true. You did murder the naval officer and I was your accomplice."

Valnoir ran his hand over his forehead like one who tries to collect his thoughts. He was beginning to think that the speaker had gone mad, for Taupier's serious tone did not allow belief in a hoax. To assure himself, he feigned for an instant to accept the abominable declaration.

"Oh, very well, then!" he exclaimed, laughing forcedly, "I did murder M. de Saint-Senier without my knowledge—I am 'Valnoir or the Murderer Unawares'—a capital title for a blood and thunder drama—yet I would much like to be enlightened a little as to the details of my misdeed."

"That's easy enough," returned the twisted man with a coolness freezing his auditor. "You had to fight a first-class pistol shot who had the first fire. According to all likelihood you would have been a dead man. I worked to equalise the chances, that's all."

"I—I do not follow you," stammered Valnoir, though he began to get an inkling of the truth.

"You shall though, for I have nothing to hold back from you. I tell you that I was anxious to save your life; and that I thought out a little plan to assure you against a probable fate. Had I been wavering, your forecasts and nervous disquietude on the ground would have swayed me. A man aims badly when he has been digging the earth for—you know, what! and still more when he believes in superstitious memories. You spoke so mournfully of your father, shot in June, 1848, on the barricades, that you would have doubtlessly finished like him if I had not taken my precautions."

"What did you do?" demanded the terrified journalist.

"In loading the pistols, I put a leaden bullet into one, and a cork ball into the other, and I contrived matters so that the naval officer chose the inoffensive weapon."

"Scoundrel!" cried Valnoir, taking the speaker by the throat.

But the latter shook himself out of his clutch with a vigour not denoted by his physical construction, and put the table between them.

"Here's a fuss over one reactionary suppressed," he jeered, "and I do think you have a lot to complain about."

This excess of impudence almost calmed Valnoir, who remembered the circumstances of the duel most opportunely.

"But villain that you are! it is you, and you alone, who murdered that man! I neither saw nor handled the pistols, and no one can accuse me of the infamy which you were pleased to commit."

"Nobody except the show girl, as it seems to me."

"But she makes a mistake—I shall prove it, and leave you to bear alone the burden of your crime."

"A good idea, but I fear that you will have some difficulty in separating our two courses. You have followed the legal curriculum, and you ought to know the Latin maxim: 'Whoso gains by a crime committeth it.' Now, who gained by your adversary's death, I ask you?"

The argument went home. Valnoir fell back upon the divan and covered his face with his hands during a rather lengthy silence. The humpback enjoyed his triumph, and from his proud perch on the table corner, threw down glances of pity on his involuntary accomplice.

"Wretch, you have destroyed me and will be destroyed with me," moaned Valnoir, in a voice muffled with deep feeling.

"It may be so," agreed Taupier, off-handedly.

"Mark me! you cannot have listened to what I told you. You forget that your dreadful trickery is known, and that you were not even cunning enough to commit it unseen."

"Oh, hang it all!" cried the humpback, vexed like an artist to whom a flaw in his work is pointed out, "I could not foresee that we should be spied upon by a whole troupe of mountebanks. To manipulate the pistols, I skilfully got rid of the man's cousin, and also of that big Hector Podensac, but I never thought that the pile of cut wood screened those confounded acrobats."

"Do you mean that the girl is not alone in the knowledge?"

"Why, no," answered Taupier, tranquilly: "*Our* secret is known to as many as three."

He emphasised the word '*our*,' which implied Valnoir's complicity. That caused the latter to start, but he had not the courage to protest.

"It seems to me that you are becoming sensible," went on the humpback. "If you will only listen to me a couple of minutes, I am sure we shall manage to agree."

The other shook his head in a manner that Taupier took as a threat.

"Oh, I don't want you to thank me, or even approve of me," he said, with rare audacity. "But now the thing is done, you will agree that we are bound to look to the consequences."

Instead of answering, Rose's lover watched the speaker with restless attention.

"I was saying that we have three persons against us. I may say four, inasmuch as that little jade has related our private business in writing to the departed party's cousin," proceeded Taupier, with the smooth manner of a man reckoning up the prospects of a commercial undertaking.

"Then that showman and his fellow also saw—"

"The showman, as you are pleased to style the honourable ambassador

of the last scion of the Charmières, is full in the swim," replied the distorted man, without appearing to notice Valnoir's wry face. "In his hands rests what prosecuting counsel term a piece of convicting evidence, for he picked up the leaden bullet which I cleverly tossed over the pile of wood."

The unfortunate duellist groaned profoundly

"As for Alcindor the Philosopher," continued Taupier, "I am not sure that he deigned to descend from the summits of Fusionism to attend to terrestrial pettinesses, but he was behind the woodpile with his master, and it is very likely that he also knows about my little bit of jugglery."

"We are lost," muttered Valnoir.

"Nonsense! how so? out of the four witnesses for the prosecution, to keep to legal phraseology," said the satanic humpback, "I have two under my thumb, and I answer you for their not blabbing without my leave and license."

"How is that?" timidly inquired the editor.

"Dash it all! it's no puzzle. In placing the newspaper at the beck and call of the new society so happily entitled 'The Lighters of Pipes at the Moon,' I have secured the everlasting devotion of the strong man and his clown."

"I won't have it," cried Valnoir, "I refuse absolutely to defend the stupid theories of those two idiots."

"Then I see no means of preventing them from telling tales," said Taupier coldly.

"But it is impossible," objected the writer, "the 'Serpenteau' has succeeded because it moved in opposition to the stereotyped ways of wits—how would you have it sustain overwhelming absurdities? In one week there would not be left a single paying subscriber."

"But who talked about sustaining them with your trained pen? Do you imagine by any chance that our future subscribers will read *your* articles? There is one sound reason for most of them to abstain—they neglected to learn the alphabet."

"I don't understand," muttered the other.

"Why, thundering blockhead that you are, don't you see that you are a power with your talent as a pamphleteer? The Lighters of Pipes at the Moon will be your army to demolish masters, tradesmen, landlords, all the authorities that check the expansion of the Fusionist idea, and before six months we can enthrone our principle on the site you will have cleared."

"You are proposing a pretty mission," growled the humiliated journalist.

"Paul Louis Courier did nothing else—though he had no idea of that," said the pitiless humpback; "but this is not the question. If you will let me act, I guarantee the silence of Pilevert and Alcindor."

"Unfortunate man, even though I consented to dishonour myself by buying the silence of those brutes, we should still lie at the mercy of that girl and M. de Saint-Senier."

"That's another matter," rejoined Taupier, "but once I will also take upon myself. Only you must acquaint me with all you know about the pair of them."

"I have told you all I know," said Valnoir sadly.

"To begin with, there's Saint-Senier," went on the humpback, without being checked by this lack of assistance. "I don't call him very dangerous, for, supposing the Prussians have not made away with his heroic person, he saw nothing on the ground and can only offer hearsay evidence."

"Quite enough," observed the journalist.

"Nothing at all," said the humpback peremptorily ; "as an honourable gentleman he will hesitate when he has to say it on oath. There's only the girl who may do us harm, unless I attend to her."

"And what can you do against a crazed creature who cannot speak, who has no home, and who cares for nobody and nothing?"

"Oh, you think so, do you?" returned Taupier ; "well now, I am sure that through this pretended crack-brain we shall get to know all the others thoroughly. Only I must have some information upon her head. I have tried to pump Pilevert ; but though I wetted the sucker with a decanter of Kirsch, he worked dry. Out with it : where did you meet her last evening?"

"Behind the Madeleine, at the entrance of the Rue Tronchet."

"By herself?"

"Yes. But I fancied that she had just left a person who drove away in a cab as I came up."

"A man?"

"No, a woman. She put her head out of the window and waved her good-bye."

"This is glowing with interest," chuckled the triumphant humpback. "Go on, old fellow, I believe I hold the clue."

XXVI.

"OH," said Valnoir, "I am afraid you halloa before you are out of the wood. I scarcely caught more than a glimpse of the person in the cab, and, moreover, I do not know where she was going."

"It was a cab?" said the hunchback, appearing to reflect profoundly.

"Yes ; and I remember now it was drawn by a pair of greys."

"Of course you did not see the number?"

"I never thought of looking at it, I assure you, and anyhow it was some distance off when I ran against the mad girl."

"What a pity," muttered Taupier between his gnashing teeth, "only to think that we would know who it was by just such another piece of paste-board as this," he added, playing with a slip which his fingers had encountered on the table.

Submerged in serious reflections, Valnoir was distractedly following the humpback's movement, when the latter suddenly cried out :

"But where does this numbered card come from?"

"Don't know," answered Rose's worshipper, scanning, in surprise, the object fingered by Taupier.

It was one of the tables of fares which cabmen are bound to give their hirers on being engaged ; it was creased and damp, for the printed lines were scarcely legible. The humpback had idly taken it up from beside the denunciatory paper thrown on the table by Valnoir after he had read it.

"Wake up," said Taupier, quickly, "try to remember if you had a cab yesterday and whether this card fell out of your pocket when you came home."

"I am sure of the contrary, and that Bourignard, who goes mad on the question of tidiness, would have swept it up had it been about this morning."

"Then you brought it here, stuck to that paper of our minx, and dropped it without noticing it when you showed me the other?"

"It is quite possible," agreed Valnoir, without fully understanding yet.

"It's positive. Now, can you remember the girl's actions when she put the denunciation under Saint-Senier's nose?"

"Fully: she drew it out of her bosom where it was rolled up and tolerably shapeless from the soaking by water. The officer just glanced at it before tossing it on the table in the guard-house, where I picked it up and stuffed it in my pocket after reading it rapidly myself."

"And did you not refer to it until you exhibited it just now?"

"Not I—I found it when I dressed exactly as I took it up."

"Glorious!" ejaculated Taupier, triumphantly. "Now we know where we are, and with this card we shall learn with whom the red witch was keeping an appointment behind the church. I have a vague idea, by the way, that I have guessed it already."

"You are much cleverer than I," granted Valnoir, dolefully.

"Try to recall if you did not see somebody you know hanging round the Madeleine?"

"N-no, I remember nobody," faltered the journalist.

"I can revive your memory, for luckily the lady of your love is keener-sighted than you, and she unbosomed herself to me yesterday evening."

"I understand less and less," said Valnoir, tartly, as allusions to his ensnarer almost always vexed him.

"Who could be praying so late but a truly devout person, and one painfully afflicted?"

"Mademoiselle Renée de Saint-Senier!" exclaimed Valnoir, struck with a recollection blotted out by the night's agitation.

"Hurrah! you are waking up at last, but you needed lots of spurring, and the lovely Rose was quite right to tell me of the jealous squabble between you about the noble young lady."

"Yes, yes, that's true—I saw her going up the church steps."

"At what time?"

"Oh, at dusk, a long while before I met the vagrant, and I hardly believe—"

"Pooh, pooh! pious members of the upper classes make much of their devotions, and I am ready to wager that the lady in the cab was Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier who had been chatting with that rope-dancer."

"Sooth to say," mused Valnoir, "Régine did seem to have been waiting on the bench where I first spied her; but on the other hand, what connection can there be between a mountebank's pupil and—"

"You forget her vocation for ambulance duty, and her return from Saint-Germain with the illustrious lamented. Neither of us know exactly what happened on that sentimental journey, for I have not been able to lay hold again of that paladin Podensac, but I am sure there is a mystery, and one that I shall cleave into with this."

He flourished the table of fares.

"Number 5,721!" read he. "By the power of this talisman and by the steps to be taken by citizen Frapillon, the business man and cashier of the 'Serpenteau,' I shall learn in three days what I want to know, and—"

"And we shall be no further out of the toils than before, since that girl saw all and has told all," interrupted Valnoir.

"You let me alone, and I warrant that ere long she will write no more *billets doux* in the style of this one you showed me."

The hapless editor regarded his enforced confederate with disquietude as if he feared to read a fresh crime in his eyes.

"Oh, don't be alarmed," said Taupier who understood him, "I shall use tender means."

"But," observed Valnoir timidly, "if those persons were hidden in the clearing, they will have also seen—"

"The little work we executed at the foot of the big oak before the duel?"

He was answered with a nod.

"I am not sure of that, but it is probable," returned the humpback coolly, who knew fairly well how things stood since his first talk with Pilevert.

"And are you not uneasy about that?"

"So long as the Prussians have a garrison at Saint-Germain, I think we may sleep sound. The showman will not go out there to give performances with his clown and sorceress. After the siege is raised, we can consider about it, as the kings used to say, when there were kings in France."

Valnoir became more gloomy, and sank again into deep ponderings.

"To sum up," proceeded Taupier, not wishing to give him time to retract, "you will let me have this cabalistic card and give me *carte blanche* as well to set up my batteries with the help of our honest Frapillon."

"So be it," agreed the editor, in no mood to offer objections.

"As for the great association," continued the intriguer in the tone of a showman at the door of his booth, "we shall debate the statutes to-morrow evening at the famous Café of the Dead Rat where I have convoked our illustrious friends, and I hope you will honour the humanitarian gathering with your desirable presence."

"Do not rely on me, I do not know whether I shall be free," said Valnoir ill-humouredly.

"You can ask for leave to stay out late of Citizeness Charmière," cried the irreverent humpback, proceeding to the door. "I shall run round to the office and then to Frapillon, the most socialist of cashiers." •

"To borrow some money on account?" queried the chief editor with a long face.

"In order to protect your days against the provincial squires, you ungrateful man!" responded Taupier, disappearing like a Parthian after sending his shaft.

Valnoir was left to his thoughts, which were far from gay. The revelation heard out of the mouth of the villainous deformed man oppressed his troubled conscience with its full weight, and he debated if he had not better break with the scoundrel and go and tell M. de Saint-Senier the whole story. It was a loyal and salutary inspiration, and the journalist would not have been tardy to follow it at another time, but since Madame de Charmière had twined her life with his, she or her souvenir always intervened between his resolutions and his acts.

"I had better consult Rose," would say her voluntary slave in grave situations, and never had one more grave urged him to seek that dangerous Egeria's opinion. So he decided to submit the case to her, and he was dressing to go out thither, when he recalled her prohibition. Her apartments were interdicted all the day, by her note, and he was forced to put off till the morrow the terrible confidence.

To kill the time until dinner, he lit a cigar and installed himself in an easy-chair to brood over his recent adventures. This conversation with Taupier had been long, and the sun was already gilding with its parting beams the tree tops of the garden extending beneath the terrace. Through the leaves of clematis and sweet peas climbing along the trellis, which the ferocious radical Bourignard did not disdain to water twice a day, Valnoir saw a broad lawn on which flirted the neighbouring sparrows. This seldom-mown sward lay before a pavilion, constructed like a chalet isolated in the midst of this garden; once it belonged apparently to a mansion, demolished like many others, to give place to more productive houses. This house's windows were never opened, and the journalist had always believed it untenanted. Indifferent as Parisians are, he had never inquired about the occupants, if any, and merely agreed that the rustic roof nicely closed in the view. For a wonder, he noticed this evening that the venetian blinds on the first floor were raised. It occurred to him that the dwellers had returned from some suburban villa, driven in by the Prussians, and he cursed the siege which had perhaps brought him prying or unpleasant neighbours.

Though not naturally curious and engrossed with his own thoughts at the time, he could not help trying to catch a glimpse of the refugees. Nobody was visible on the verandah running round the house, but the setting sun poured into the middle room through the open window. At the back were white hangings at the foot of which, to his immense surprise, Rose's admirer clearly beheld a kneeling woman.

XXVII.

THE kneeling woman was clad in black, a mourning costume that closely accorded with her attitude. She seemed praying beside a tomb. Her back was turned towards the observer, who could only judge by her figure that she was quite young. It was most difficult to tell to whom her devotions were addressed, for the ample white curtains at the back might equally as reasonably cover a bier as a sick-bed. The former hypothesis could hardly be correct, for how could one admit, indeed, that this long-untenanted pavilion should be re-opened to celebrate a funeral? The dead are not buried without preliminary formalities, particularly in Paris, and a death in the small house would have certainly occasioned goings and comings which could not have escaped the neighbours' eyes. The same reasoning might apply, it is true, to an illness, and the silence always reigning around the abandoned abode agreed no better with the obligatory stir of a doctor's visits.

Valnoir made these reflections swiftly, and his surprise increased the more. He could not detach his gaze from the saddening sight, and not to be perceived in case the object turned, he took up his position behind the trellis, so as to be completely hidden. Since he had fallen into a series of uncommon adventures, the usually sceptical writer felt much inclined to believe in the marvellous, and particularly to attach everything he saw to his own affairs. Taupier's words kept running in his head, and he only needed to see a woman in mourning to think of Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier. But where was the likelihood that his adversary's sister, highly connected in the fashionable part of the town, would come to dwell in a lone house on the heights of the Breda quarter?

Before the duel, Valnoir knew that she was spending the summer at Maison-Laffite, with an aunt who wintered with her in a small house in the Rue d'Anjou-Saint-Honoré. It was by the same token, in relation to this country stay in brilliant company, that the "Serpentea" had published under the heading of "News of the Upper Ten," some lines wherein Renée's brother had seen an offensive allusion. Therefore the editor scouted the first supposition that had struck him, but he remained nevertheless at his post. The sun went down, and the interior of the mysterious room was filled with shade. The white curtains were still visible, but the black figure blended with the twilight.

"She must have a light, if only a taper," thought the watcher, "and then I shall see the face of this sorrowing beauty."

"He was startled out of his reflections by the entrance of the majestic Bourignard bringing him the evening papers.

"Sir," said the democratic doorkeeper, "the moblot has called again for you, but this time I told him that you had not come back since yesterday, and that I was getting in a fidget about you."

"Capital, old Bourignard, capital; you are gifted with great imaginative powers. And what did the provincial warrior say?"

He did not seem over-surprised, only he chattered with his comrade and I caught him saying: 'In fact, it is possible he will never return,' and the other answered: 'A good thing, too! it will be one the less of them!'

"Indeed! are you sure that's what they said?" cried Valnoir.

"As sure as I am that I know by heart 'the Declaration of the Rights of Man,'" replied the doorkeeper, solemnly.

"Bourignard, you are a model servitor, and this week I will give you free passes to the Varieties Theatre."

"If it makes no difference, sir, I would rather have a couple of orders for the music hall where Madame Bordas sings 'La Canaille!' my son Agricola prefers that hymn to all those frivolous and conservative spectacles."

"You shall have your passes, virtuous Bourignard. I am going out to dine and shall be home late, so do not sit up for me."

"Do you require a light, sir?"

"No, never mind," said Valnoir, hastily. "By the way, is there anybody living in that pavilion over there?"

"I have not heard so," replied the grave doorkeeper; "the fact is politics leave me no time at present to busy myself with what goes on around us. Another thing, the entrance to that house is in the Rue de Laval and I have never seen any one there."

"Some mistake of mine," observed Valnoir, carelessly, not wishing to admit Master Bourignard into his confidence.

As soon as he was alone again, he went back into his observatory, but he was vexed to find that the window had been closed during his conversation with his doorkeeper, and not the least light twinkled through the blinds. Thus fell the curtain when the piece had grown interesting, but there was some consolation in the story Bourignard had brought him.

"They believe me killed or taken in the skirmish," he thought, and I am quit of them for a few days. From now until Saint-Senier is undeceived, I shall have time to take my measures, for I daresay he does not regularly read the newspapers."

This encouraging thought made him think of glancing over those his doorkeeper had left him. As the house opposite seemed more deserted than ever

he had no fear of being seen. So he lighted a candle and ran over the evening papers. As usual they were full of strategic fancies which Valnoir skipped to get at the events of the day. The night's affair of outposts could not pass unnoticed, and the editor had grounds for anticipating that thereporters would not neglect so fruitful a theme for making copy. In fact he found in the first journal he came across a long account of the nocturnal brush to which the narrator had not failed to give grandiose proportions. Of course, the enemy had been vigorously repulsed and had recrossed the Seine, bearing away many dead and wounded.

"Unfortunately," added the military reporter, "the lieutenant commanding the most advanced post is missing. M. de Saint-S—, who is believed dead, was a brilliant officer, who has heroically forfeited with his life the error of letting himself be surprised."

Valnoir dispensed with the commentaries of the amateur tactician, who bitterly deplored the fatal negligence of our officers. What he had read was ample to reassure him.

"Come, come," he muttered, "I really believe I shall get out of this villainous scrape without much bother. There is nothing said about the girl, so she must have disappeared with Saint-Senier. I shall leave Taupier to fight it out with the two mountebanks, and then I shall devise some way of settling him, for this humpback will become too dangerous."

The only cloudy point was the visit Bourignard mentioned; but Valnoir naturally concluded that the two strangers were simply bearing the challenge from their friend and comrade, the lieutenant.

"I am sufficiently known about town for some soldier of their acquaintance to have mentioned my name, and they would not have had much trouble to learn where I live. Bourignard's reply will put them off, and it's probable they will not return."

After having thus settled things to his satisfaction, Valnoir felt relieved, and made up his mind to finish dressing and go to dine at some neighbouring restaurant. Madame de Charmière's house being under seal till next day, he felt like amusing himself in the noise and bustle of some public resort. He was about to leave the smoking-room, when the sound of a bell again drew his attention towards the garden.

"Ha! they receive visitors at the mysterious abode, eh?"

Twice the ringing was repeated, and seemed to come from an entrance in the Rue de Laval, as Bourignard had said. It was far from likely, therefore, that the visitor, whoever it was, would come out upon the lawn behind the residence. Nevertheless, to prepare for everything, Valnoir blew out the candle and waited. His perseverance was rewarded. He had not been five minutes on the look-out before two human forms appeared from round the corner of the house. It was too dark a night for him to distinguish the sex of the promenaders on the sward not fifty paces off. They gesticulated with much vivacity, and, as he thought one of them often raised his arm towards the windows of the house, he concluded there was reference made to the room with the white drapery. The rather high breeze from the south prevented the voices reaching the terrace, to the spectator's great disgust.

"I know I am a fool to linger here," thought the journalist. "I can send round to-morrow for inquiries in the Rue de Laval, and probably learn what has so much interested me."

As he was going to give it up, he perceived that the pair had changed their direction, and gradually approached the hanging garden.

"Pshaw!" he said, "let us keep up the watch while we are about it. A

couple of sentences will inform me as to my neighbours, and I will be off to dinner as soon as I have the key to the puzzle."

The couple came on slowly by reason of their frequent pauses, and still only their gestures could be noted, and not a word heard. Valnoir's heart beat without his knowing why, and an unaccountable instinct rivetted him to the spot. His curiosity was just about to be satisfied, for the mysterious promenaders had at last come within earshot and he was redoubling his attention, when a deafening peal of laughter burst out behind him.

"What the devil are you about there?" shouted the insupportable Tanprier, who had stolen in upon him on tiptoe.

Before Valnoir had time to turn, the vision in the garden vanished.

XXVIII.

ON the third story of a house in the Rue Cadet was the office of "M. J. B. Frapillon, business agent," for such were the name and title engraved on a brass plate on the door. The building, composed of two immense piles separated by a long yard, was a downright village under a roof, for on its different floors were to be found all Parisian crafts and pursuits. The ground floor was occupied by a wine merchant, a musical instrument-maker, and a book and newsagent. The first floor was inhabited by a speculator in public dancing-rooms and a bill-discounter who styled himself a banker, though his real industry was bleeding the petty tradesmen round about. On the second floor were a dressmaker, two seamstresses and a maker of false jewellery.

Jean Baptiste Frapillon's suite marked off the limit between the business and the dwelling places. Above him there were only *lorettes* of the fourth degree, counter-jumpers and clerks looking for employment. Despite this queer confusion of lodgers, or rather on the very account of such promiscuity, the house was wonderfully well chosen for a "shady" business to be carried on. The staircases were being incessantly travelled by people of every condition brought thither by the most diverse motives. The needy fortune-hunter jostled the careworn trader who came to raise a loan on "queer paper." The nightly dancer at the Jardin Mabille, painted and feathered for war, met the economical mother of a family looking for cheap bonnets. The result of this unending movement was that a client could come to consult the business agent without fear of being remarked, whatever class he belonged to.

J.B. Frapillon enjoyed unlimited consideration from the doorkeeper of this vast hive by reason of the generous tips with which he always supplemented the prompt payment of his rent. In the quarter he passed as a clever man, and for an honest one to boot, from the absence of proof to the contrary. He had always professed rather advanced democratic opinions, yet he paraded profound respect for public order, and very exactly fulfilled all his civic and social duties.

He was generally chosen as scrutineer of the votes in electoral operations and, since the latest revolution, there had been much talk of his commanding a battalion. Of his antecedents, his fellow citizens knew very little. There was a vague report that he had been a notary in the country, and then head clerk in an office of the Mont-de-Piété, which he had resigned in order to devote himself entirely to business. This hazy word, covering all kinds of illicit or legitimate doings, was understood in its best sense by his

neighbours. It was repeated on the quiet that J. B. F. did not confine his labours to ordinary matters of contention, but that his intelligence, doubled with quite republican probity, had won him the confidence of many political celebrities. Nobody knew him to have either wife, child, chick or dog, which elevated him above gossip and distinguished him among his fellows.

The flat of this worthy was composed of an ante-room forming an office, a sitting-room furnished with Utrecht velvet, a study full of labelled boxes piled up on each other, and several other rooms for his household requirements. J. B. Frapillon professed the salutary axiom that private life should be inviolate, and the public never penetrated beyond the three professional rooms. His clients were divided into classes. Clerks seeking situations stopped in the outer room where they conferred with a thin, sickly, pale clerk, a mournful fruit of pettifoggery, who registered their wants and distributed gratis prospectuses or advice if they would pay for it. Debtors wishful to renew a protested bill, and shopkeepers at loggerheads with landlords about giving up a lease, came into the yellow-room to meet the manager of the agency. Important tradesmen and upper class clients alone passed the study door, studded with gilt nails. These three rooms communicated with one another, but the private apartments were reached by a passage of their own, coming out on the landing beside the official entrance. The master himself always opened this door consecrated to the privileged few whom he liked to admit. When there was a concurrence of ordinary and extraordinary callers, an electric bell, sounded by the clerk, notified J. B. F. in the private sanctum that he was wanted in the study or the reception-room. No awkward or confusing meeting was possible.

On a fine autumn morning, the important character who exercised such complex crafts in the Rue Cadet, had left to his subordinate the task of receiving the three sorts of ordinary callers. He had retired into the rear-most of his private rooms, and was giving audience to a fair and fashionable person who was none other than Rose de Charmière. This tabooed lair for the vulgar, was a round room with furniture that recalled the vicissitudes of J. B. F.'s thorny life. The walls literally disappeared under carved frames, trophies of weapons, and objects of art, waifs and strays picked up in bankruptcies or brokers' sales. There were five gasaliers hanging from the ceiling, three clocks on pedestals, and varied plate on the dressers. All these tokens of the state pawn-shops ill agreed with stacks of newspaper files in the corners, and enormous brass-bound registers on a colossal desk. In this odd agglomeration of heterogeneous things, the sole object which appeared placed by the personal taste of the agent was a portrait of Hébert, member of the Revolutionary Convention, in a wooden frame with a crown of oak.

The admirer of the too celebrated communist of 1793 was a man of about forty—tall, stout, strongly built and adorned, notwithstanding his peaceful profession, with a full red beard that would have done honour to a sapper. His mouth was large and the lips thin, his nose peaked, and his brow, rather low through precocious baldness, doubled the apparent dimensions. Small but quick and intelligent eyes sparkled behind fine gold-rimmed spectacles. In his physiognomy was a mingling of cunning and audacity, the trickery of an unscrupulous speculator sustained by the boldness of a fanatical sectary. In short, the general aspect was displeasing.

J. B. Frapillon was draped in a cashmere dressing-gown, but from the

morning he wore a white waistcoat, black tie, and pearl-grey trousers. It was the uniform of the chief of a civil service department, less the coat. Sitting opposite him, Madame de Charmière, in her fashionable morning costume, looked like a leader of society condescending to solicit an administrative favour without detriment to her superior position. She had only just come in, and was playing with the papers on the writing-table with the tip of her parasol, like a woman accustomed to discuss business just as she would order a pair of boots.

"So there's something new, pretty dear," said the spectacled man. "You would not have come so early if you did not need me badly," he added with an equivocal smirk.

"You have guessed right, future dictator," replied Rose; "it's astonishing how politics sharpen up people."

"It is my business to be sharp," returned J. B. Frapillon, "and you know that I am all yours, cashbox included."

"It is not only money that's in question, and I have to speak with you at length this morning."

"On what subject, please?"

"On almost all."

"Very well, I am listening."

"To begin with, Valnoir—"

"Aha! I have not seen our dear friend these three days, and I am afraid he has taken a new departure. Are you jealous, dear fair one?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Frapillon," said Madame de Charmière, shrugging her shoulders. "How is the newspaper getting on?"

"Wonderfully well, and it appears still an excellent venture."

"Then you do believe I made a good investment?"

"Exceptional! it's twenty per cent. at least, to say nothing of the right to withdraw your money, if it takes a bad turn."

"You haven't given Valnoir any hint, have you?"

"What do you take me for? He quite believes the money is found by an American who is here hunting for a contract for rifles."

Rose nodded in approval.

"Let me tell you, dear one, that I found you a capital speculation there," went on the agent, laughing. "With the one hand you receive as a capitalist and with the other as a charming creature, for between ourselves, the share that Valnoir draws returns piecemeal into your money-box."

"Rather!" said the noble dame, cynically.

"You were born for business, and I am not up to your mark," returned J. B. F., fixing his spectacles on more firmly by a movement peculiar to him.

"Nevertheless, I come to ask you for advice and assistance."

"I am at your orders, as you know."

Madame de Charmière was playing with her parasol handle, in no hurry to speak.

"Is it serious?" inquired the agent, not habituated to see his client in a quandary.

"My dear fellow, I have had a partner thrust into my game," said Rose, in the decided tone of one who has come to a resolution.

"Duce take it! is Taupier getting to be a nuisance?"

"He? a little, but there's another one."

"Who, who?"

"A brother of mine, answered the lady after a pause.

"Brother !" repeated Frapillon. "I thought you had no—legitimate—family."

"It is all that is left me, and it's one too many."

"Does this—forgotten—relative drop on you expressly to obtain support?"

"If that were all, I could put him off with two or three thousand franc notes."

"Oho ! your brother must be rather clever. It runs in the family."

"Do not joke. He holds a means of ruining Valnoir, me, you, and still more, the journal."

"And this is—"

"A secret which he has chanced upon and which he is the man to use."

J. B. F. turned pale and settled his spectacles to cover his confusion. He was going to speak when the electric bell tinkled sonorously.

XXIX.

"WHAT'S that?" inquired Madame de Charmière.

"Nothing. Only my clerk notifying me of a client."

"Well, go and attend to him and return."

"It's needless. He will wait. Go on with your story, my beauty."

"I forewarn you it will take some time."

"I daresay, but you know my system : when I play, I want to know all the cards beforehand."

"I have no reason to conceal mine. I was telling you there was a secret, one concerning Valnoir."

"Do you know it?"

"Not yet ; I only know that it arises from that duel in which Charles had the misfortune to kill M. de Saint-Senier."

"Phew ! what you are telling me is most obscure, and I do not see any too clearly what connection—"

"Nor I any better, but if I knew the whole game, I should not want to consult you," said Madame de Charmière, drily.

"So, dear friend, inform me a little better if you require my help."

"You would have known already if you had not interrupted me so much."

"Quite so, time is money."

"To continue," said the lady, a trifle impatiently, "my brother, whom I have not seen for years, has returned to Paris when I least expected him. I even own that I believed he was dead, which will show you that we have never kept up any correspondence."

"An excellent plan. Families are generally a nuisance."

"You need not tell me that, my dear Frapillon," sighed Madame de Charmière. "My brother is the only relative left me and he never has done anything but injure me. Would you believe that, notwithstanding all the sacrifices to which I resigned myself to keep him in the right road, he has come down to being a showman at fairs."

"Pish ! there are no trades of which a man need not be proud, if they pay," commented the business man, seeming to compassionate his client very slightly on her family sorrows.

"That's possible ; but there are people whom we may not be proud of, and if my brother had any sense, he would go and seek his fortune in America."

"He can't help it—he's lost touch of his class," observed J. B. F., philosophically.

"In short," resumed Rose, "he has come to Paris, having a clown in tow, and he presented himself to me in that disreputable company."

"How was it that you did not send them flying out?"

"I take good care not to do that till I secure the secret. On the contrary, I kept them to dinner and tried to sound my brother, but it was throwing away good wine to intoxicate him, for all I extracted was very vague."

"What a pity! a good plau," said the agent, wagging his head like a good judge of wine and men.

"I might have succeeded, but bad luck would have it that Valnoir was at the table that evening. My brother saw that we were well acquainted, and he fought shy of me."

"Oho, now it is getting mixed. And what does Valnoir think of the family gathering?"

"I do not know too clearly, but, in any case, he did not appear the least in the world embarrassed."

"Good! that's a token that he does not believe his secret discovered," observed Frapillon, judiciously.

"Needless to tell you that I presented my guest as a stranger, bringing me news of an exiled brother."

"Very neat! but about the secret. Do you not at all suspect what it is?"

"Evidently something that occurred in the Forest of Saint-Germain which my worthy brother through some chance beheld. I must state, my dear friend, that despite all my influence over Valnoir, I do not know one part of his life. He has often absented himself without apparent motive, and I have ascertained that he went towards Saint-Germain."

"There lies the mystery evidently," said the business man, listening with much attention, "and there the search must be made; but as long as the siege lasts, we cannot seek information among the Prussians."

"So I thought of something else," resumed Madame de Charmière.

"Let's hear your plan, for plans are in fashion," said J. B. Frapillon, making an allusion to the famous plan of General Trochu which was to have crumpled up Von Moltke and the Germans, and liberated the capital, for J. B. F. did not disdain to enliven dry business with a shower of witticisms now and then.

"To begin with, I supported a side-issue invented by Taupier, though I do not care for him—"

"He is of some value," said the spectacled man gravely.

"Maybe so, in politics, and it is politics we are now talking about. A grand popular association is to be founded, a campaign to be carried on by the newspaper—Valnoir will explain the affair to you. The important thing for the time being is that my brother and his clown, an idiot with socialist ideas, are mixed up in this project, and that I am sure to have them under my hand."

"Fine!" exclaimed Frapillon. "Adroit as I know you to be, you will be unlucky if you do not draw them out."

"So I hope, but I want you to do it."

"I? how?" said the agent, turning distrustful.

"I told my brother you were the skilfullest man in town to manage a delicate matter—I gave him your address, and he will certainly come to consult you."

J. B. Frapillon reflected leisurely.

"Excuse me, pretty one," he said after a rather long silence, "but if he was wary as regarded you, he will be more so to me from the very fact that I know you."

"Pooh! I thought you a keener blade," sneered Madame de Charmière. "How is it that you do not guess that by insinuating your willingness to betray me, for a consideration, you would obtain a confession?"

"Ha! ha! not badly imagined," said the agent with a dry laugh that was a token of satisfaction in him. "Then your brother is not a conjurer?"

"Only by profession, and not so good as you, for a certainty; and besides, he does not know us cits. He has never lived in Paris."

"Good! if I succeed, what am I to do?"

"Let me know without a moment's delay. You must send round for me, as soon as you have interviewed him."

J. B. Frapillon had again lapsed into his broodings.

"Well?" demanded she.

"My ever-loveliest one," said the business-agent, "I ask nothing better than to serve you, but before I start, I must know whither I go. We must come to a thorough understanding."

"What do you mean?" queried Rose greatly astonished.

"There's nothing simpler. Who are you for?"

"I do not understand."

"I must explain myself more clearly. If your brother wishes to realise by this secret, it is expected to yield well, eh?"

"Probably."

"Then it might be your interest to work the mine with him. On the other hand, such working may be prejudicial to Valnoir, who is your friend and mine."

"Granted."

"Good! now, are you siding with him or your brother?"

At this cynically put question, Madame de Charmière could not help colouring up slightly. The agent watched her above his glasses as if to read the depth of her mind. The lady was determined to be careful in the fencing.

"How can you suppose that I would hesitate between the man I love and a brother who has never caused me anything but grief?" she answered hypocritically.

"Very well!" said J. B. F., nowise affected; "then I may march squarely against M—, by the way what's his name?"

"Who?" inquired Rose, though fully comprehending.

"Why, your brother."

"Antoine Pilevert," answered the high-born damozel curtly, not liking to trumpet her family name, even before her business agent.

Again the electric bell tinkled, this time for several seconds; the signal agreed upon with the clerk when it was an important visitor.

"Will you allow me to see who that is?" asked Frapillon, rising.

"Do so, my dear fellow," said Madame de Charmière, "I will wait for you as I have some further instructions to give."

Profiting by the permission, the agent nimbly vanished through a door communicating with his study. Rose wondered if she had not made a blunder in trusting him with the conduct of so troublesome an affair. Her faith in Frapillon's honesty was scanty, and his perfidious objections set her thinking.

"He is capable of doing what he proposes, without me," she thought,

"What prevents him coming to an agreement with my brother? I must see Antoine this evening and have another attempt to make him confess before finally arranging with this Frapillon."

Her cogitations were interrupted by the agent who came in on tiptoe, and holding his finger to his lips.

"It's he!" he said.

"Who's he?"

"Your brother, M. Antoine Pilevert in person."

"So soon!" ejaculated Rose, annoyed at this precipitate visit.

"Shall I send him away?" asked J. B. F., clearly noting his caller's agitation.

"No, no," said she, hesitatingly. "But as I am eager to know the result of the interview, and I am here—"

"You'd like to remain? Do better than that, lovely one—assist at the meeting."

"You are mad. He must not see me."

"He'll not see you, don't be alarmed."

"How's that?"

"Come with me that I may show you how my rooms are arranged."

XXX.

THERE was much to tempt Madame de Charmière in the proposition. To assist, without being seen, at the interview between Frapillon and her brother, was to assure herself of the latter's treachery. She so little expected any such invitation that she hesitated for an instant to accept it for fear of falling into a trap. It was her old habit always to suppose the worst, and every act without a clear motive seemed suspicious to her.

"Eh, what? have you got sliding panels here as in the theatres?" she asked, mistrustfully.

"Oh, nay—I have merely a nook beside my study, where everything going on there can be seen and heard."

"A good thing to know," remarked Madame de Charmière merrily, "and when you are talking there with me, I shall want to be sure the nook is empty."

"You know that you always come in by the private way and we always have our chat in this room, where, I vow to you, you have no fear of being observed."

"Tut, tut, who knows? but may I ask why you have this Bravo of Venice spyhole?"

"My dear friend, it belongs to my business. One branch is the private inquiry line, you cannot be ignorant of that, and this is an excellent means of obtaining news first hand. I instal my client in the nook you shall see presently, and under his very eyes and ears I 'press' the person he has an interest in knowing all about."

"Very ingenious!" remarked Rose, ironically.

"Oh, it is not often used that way, for it is not always easy to lure the game into the trap. So I must often use the side-box merely to take a preliminary peep at my customers. I have examined your brother by the same process. I should have recognised him at first glance, even had not my man given me his card,"

"Hum!" said Madame de Charmière, hardly flattered by the resemblance; "what do you think of him?"

"That he is both in a hurry and a bad humour. He is walking to and fro, flourishing his hands and talking to himself. I believe that it is not wise to keep him kicking his heels any longer."

"Lead me on, then," said the adventuress, who had made up her mind.

Frapillon pushed a door and, taking his client by the hand, guided her through a long passage, thickly carpeted, so as to completely deaden the sound of footsteps.

"Here we are," he whispered, as he raised a door-hanging before a dark den.

Before them gleamed two luminous points, and Rose guessed that it was daylight penetrating by artful holes in the partition. The agent led her to an arm-chair in which she sat, and applied an eye to one of the peepholes. Almost instantly he uttered a low exclamation of surprise.

"Halloa! he's gone!" he muttered. "I can't make this out," he continued, in his client's ear; "he must have dashed away impatiently; but he cannot have got further than my clerk, who will detain him in parley, and I will bring him back."

"But if you do not?" queried Rose, in an undertone.

"Then I shall immediately return to release you," answered Frapillon, stealing away cautiously.

After turning, the lobby ended at the study which he had to pass through to reach the yellow room and the clerk's office beyond. He entered, and at once perceived that the visitor had disappeared without leaving any other trace of passage than the stump of a cigar, still smoking, thrown on the carpet as though to testify to his vexation at being made to dance attendance. Frapillon did not trouble to pick it up, but was rushing on the track of the fugitive when the reception-room door flew open roughly.

A clamour of voices in the highest key burst out at the same time, and with stupefaction the general agent saw Pilevert reappear, escorted by Taupier, not to say shoved in.

"In you go, my hero," cried the humpback. "Deuce take me, if I let friends give me the slip like that!"

"But I tell you that I am in a hurry," grumbled the showman; "Alcindor is waiting for me at the Hôtel du Grand-Vainqueur."

"Let him wait, dash it! Come, that I may introduce you to the pearl of cashiers, the most radical of moneyed men. Hail, Frapillon!"

The agent seemed to relish Taupier's compliments but slightly, and this double invasion of his study vexed him considerably. On introducing Madame de Charmière into the hiding-place, he had conceived a scheme which the humpback's arrival totally disarranged, and he began to seek some means to get rid of the trio. Pilevert appeared to be as much put out as himself. Met on the stairs as he was rushing forth piqued at having been kept waiting, the Hercules had been almost dragged back by Taupier, who dumbfounded him with his incessant chaff. In vain had the clerk opposed this infraction of his master's rules, the stubborn humpback had broken through all barriers and pushed the mountebank into the sanctuary. But Pilevert, if he had not been able to escape, was, at least, firmly decided not to talk before third parties. Of course, he had no suspicion that his sister was within hearing, but Taupier's presence was enough to seal his mouth.

"Come, come, Rampart of Avallon, what do you want of my friend?" went on the incorrigible jester. "Do you chance to be looking for an engagement for the circus of Toulouse or the Lyons Alcazar?"

Instead of answering, the athlete expressed his discontent in sullen growls.

"Stop a bit. I am off the track," continued the humpback. "I forgot that politics claim you as their own fond child, and that you are henceforth the firmest upholder of the 'Serpenteau.' Say on, unfold your desires. My friend, Frapillon, is a universal man. Are you after a piece of information?"

"None of your business," growled Pilevert.

"Getting wrathful? Then, I know it is that you are after, and you fear to make a clean breast of it before me. How wrong of a man whom I love and whose secrets I am incapable of betraying. By the same token, would you like me to prove as much? I, also, am after information, and I will set you an example of confidence by asking him for it in your presence."

J. B. Frapillon attentively followed this flow of words without any inclination to laugh, for the idea of benefiting by the fortuitous meeting of the two men had germinated in his brain.

"Won't you take a seat, sir," he said, with a show of politeness, "and oblige me with your name?"

The showman was about opening his mouth to reply when Taupier interposed.

"I will introduce you, celebrated man of prowess. Frapillon, you see before you M. Antoine Pilevert, who boasts a double claim on your friendship. In the first place, he is attached to the 'Serpenteau' staff, as its champion, and, moreover, he is dear to, and favoured by, our charming patroness, the Dame de Charmières."

"This is more than is requisite to win the gentleman a welcome here," said the business agent.

"Very well! consequently you must lavish your advice on our amiable associate; but in the meantime, and to encourage him, I claim a personal hearing."

"Wholly at your service," Frapillon hastened to say, seizing the occasion to prevent the athlete speaking in Taupier's presence.

"Number 5,721," said the humpback, showing the cabman's card found at Valnoir's. "You are to find me the cab-driver who handed that table of fares on Wednesday evening, near the Madeleine, to a woman in a scarlet dress, and where he drove another woman in a black dress."

Pilevert had suddenly become peculiarly attentive, his expression not escaping Taupier, who immediately added:

"But, now I think of it, our dear Pilevert is just the man to aid us. It's all about a young person whom he well knows. You remember, old friend—your somnambulist, the deaf-mute, with whom you were driving to Saint-Germain?"

"Régine!" blurted out the showman. "Ugh, the minx! the jade!"

"Halloa! it strikes me you no longer wear her image in your heart!"

"She has cut away," said Pilevert, unable to contain his ire, "given me the slip—a man who has kept her in food and togs these five years."

"Don't you know where she's gone?"

"No! by all the trumpets of Jericho! but if ever I get my grip on her!"

"You shall find her, Pilevert, I answer for that. Where and when did she drop you?"

"After that cursed duel, I left her at Rueil with the caravan and the dead husband inside, whilst I ran up to Paris on a trip. When I got back, only the van was to be found."

"Very well—capital! the thing looks better, and now listen to me without interrupting, please. Frapillon, my friend, here's the affair. Valnoir and I have an enemy in the sister of the officer who, as you are aware, terminated his career at Saint-Germain, as well as another in Saint-Senier, cousin of the aforesaid. All these people wish us mortal ill; they are circulating the vilest slanders about us, and they have set our virtuous Pilevert's pupil against us. The cousin has just been netted by the Prussians, but the sister, along with the girl in red, is hatching devilry which may injure us. She must be found first of all, wherever she is hiding, and then—"

"What next?" asked the agent.

"We will do for her, of course."

"Very well," returned Frapillon, without wincing.

"Does that suit you, my Hercules?"

"It does," growled Pilevert.

"Nothing could be better, my boys," said the humpback. "Union makes strength, and we will conclude on the spot a Holy Alliance between the friends of the 'Serpenteau.'"

"You may rely on me," said the business agent; "but I shall require a little more information to succeed in my searches."

"You shall have it. Meanwhile, go on the quest with that card."

"That is the ABC of our profession, and we shall soon find the cabman. It will take somewhat longer to find the women."

"Well, what is the longest time you require to lay hands on them?"

"A fortnight at the outside, or then I give it up."

"A fortnight, then! the game is as good as bagged. Long live Frapillon, who is going to stand us two absinthes."

"I agree to that, too," said the athlete.

"Citizens," said the humpback, solemnly, "the league against the enemies of the 'Serpenteau' is formed. The league for ever! and we adjourn for a fortnight, as the lawyers say."

XXXI.

OCTOBER was come and the advancing autumn dimmed the radiant sky that lighted the early disasters of the fateful war of 1870. The siege of Paris entered on its second stage, when the inhabitants comprehended that it would be a long and painful ordeal, and resigned themselves to all possible sacrifices. Food was not deficient yet, and the temperature was supportable; but the wise foresaw the coming up of Prussia's two terrible auxiliaries: frost and famine. Hence, the city no longer wore the lively and almost joyous aspect of the days following the investment. The patriotic songs were hushed, the shops closed early, and vehicles were seen less often. No more gatherings, no more blazes of gas light, which, at the commencement of the blockade, enlivened the main boulevards. Nobody lounged now, but walked on briskly, and in streets remote from the city centre, traffic almost wholly ceased after nightfall.

On this evening, Paris was sadder and gloomier than ever. All day long

the heavy guns had thundered and a sortie of the French had been repulsed. The news of the failure had swiftly spread, and on all faces was to be read the sorrow of baffled hopes. The very few wayfarers strode along with drooping heads, and, if by any chance a group did form in the middle of the deserted pavement or on a doorstep, it was to talk in undertones as by a sick bed. There was mourning in the air, and some outlying quarters assumed a lugubrious aspect. The usually bustling Rue des Martyrs was silent, and by the flicker of the long spaced out gas lamps, barely a shadow or two could be spied skirting the walls.

Towards the summit of the steep crescent forming here the south slopes of the Butte Montmartre, a solitary woman was hastening along the left hand side walk. At the corner of the Rue de Laval, she paused an instant and turned to glance rapidly behind her, doubtlessly to make sure that she was not followed. The result of her examination was satisfactory, for no foot passenger appeared on this side of the Rue de Navarin. A cab drawn by a couple of thin nags, painfully climbed the stony hill. These luckless beasts, doomed to speedy death by the necessities of the defence, stumbled and stopped every instant in spite of the driver's whipping. The impatient travellers had put their heads out of the window and cheered them on, but their shouts had no better effect than the lash circling the sides of the breathless animals, and the equipage made no headway. The woman entered the Rue de Laval and set to running like one who is nearly at her goal, and has reasons to reach it quickly. In a few seconds, she arrived before a high wall in the middle of which a low doorway enclosed worm-eaten panels. This out-of-the-way door would not seem to be often used, as the lock was rusted and the hinges were coming off. But the road was no doubt familiar to the woman, who dashed into the narrow bay and laid her hand on one of the large nails which studded the upper panel, and pressed forcibly. A bell instantly rang within, and the door opened immediately. The night-rambler stepped through, but not without bestowing a last look behind her.

As she disappeared, two human forms showed themselves round the corner, and the coachman's whip could be heard cracking as he still goaded his horses up the hill of the Rue des Martyrs. The wall hid a narrow alley of lindens with branches that grew over and formed a vault. The woman shut the door, of which hinges and fastenings must have been well oiled, for at a push it returned noiselessly into its stone socket. She stopped a while as if to listen for steps in the street before resolutely going up the dark path. Right at the end a light was shining, and, notwithstanding the darkness, the nocturnal visitor briefly came to a porch at the top of which was placed a lamp by way of beacon.

"You at last," said a rough voice, "the ladies are very uneasy, you've been such a time—By thunder! here I am forgetting again that she can't hear," added the man, taking down the lamp to guide Régine—for it was she—through a glazed passage.

The girl followed him after a friendly nod, and as she walked on took off a hooded cloak which had enwrapped her from head to heel. She no longer wore the fantastic attire of the night of her adventure with Valnoir, but was clad like a decent workwoman. Her black woollen gown and the black net she had on her head displayed even more her marvellous loveliness. Her large eyes gleamed with uncommon lustre, and the animation from a hasty walk had slightly warmed her pale complexion. No doubt her guide was struck by her charms, for he could not help mumbling :

"Who'd ever think so fine a lady went about at fairs with a show, and virtuous all the time, and so plucky! If I had not thrown myself before her, she would have been killed by the Prussian who brought down our poor M. Roger. Come on in, mademoiselle," he continued, opening a door, "here are the ladies."

In the centre of a simply furnished room, two women were sitting at a round table, the elder reading a letter, the other holding a book which she laid down quickly on seeing the girl appear.

"Here she is a last," said the guide, "and I don't believe any ill has happened to her, for she looks quite joyful."

Régine ran to the old lady and kissed her hand.

"Heaven be praised, dear child; we trembled at knowing you were belated in the streets of this accursed city."

Pronounced in a sweet and sympathetic voice, Régine understood the words by the movements of the lips, presumably, for she replied with a look of the deepest gratitude. The speaker was beyond her sixtieth year, certainly, but she was neither bowed nor wrinkled, and if her hair had not been snowy white, no one could have told her age. She must have been remarkably handsome, and the aristocratic curve of her nose accentuated on her features a proud expression tempered by her somewhat dim blue eyes. To judge what she had been in her heyday, one needed only to look at the young lady beside her, who had risen to give her hand to Régine. She was her living portrait, with all the grace and freshness of twenty summers. Tall, slender, and a blonde, Mademoiselle Renée de Saint-Senier realised the ideal of English beauty, enhanced by a fineness in the lines, and a vivacity in the actions not always found in fair Albion. Her aunt, her father's sister, by title Countess de Muire, offered the most perfect type of the old court dowagers, and high breeding was even more revealed in her manners than her person.

"Sit down, my child," she said, pointing out a chair. "Landreau, have you taken care to put out the light and close the shutters?" she inquired of the serving-man who had ushered in the girl of the booths.

The gamekeeper had preserved only the red-striped blue trousers of his garde mobile uniform, and now wore above them a green coat with turned-up skirts, which had seen service in the Saint-Senier woods.

"No fear of my omitting that, Madame la Comtesse," replied the old man. "During the last few days ugly faces have hovered round the pavilion."

"That's right, friend; keep a good guard. Renée, show that dear girl the letter telling us that Roger is wounded and a prisoner at Saint-Germain."

Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier handed the fortune-teller a paper of official shape. She took it briskly and her face shone as she read it and her eyes filled with tears.

"Poor thing!" said Madame de Muire, "how good and devoted she is!"

"And well has she proved it, aunt," said the young lady, eyeing her tenderly; "and I hope she'll never leave us."

"That's my own wish as well, dear one, but I am always in dread lest she fall again into the hands of that scoundrelly showman. Do you not also think her obstinacy strange as to concealing her story?"

"She is timid and distrustful like all sufferers," said Renée, "but I am sure she will tell us all in the end."

"You express yourself as though she could speak," said the aunt smiling. "It is true she writes with a facility and correctness that astonishes me."

"Have you also remarked her marvellous intelligence, aunt? She really hears with her eyes."

"I have always believed," continued the elder noblewoman pensively, "that she was brought up by well-bred people. But let us speak a little of our poor Roger. How he must suffer far from us—much more on that account than from his wounds, eh, Renée?"

The young lady blushed a little.

"Oh, yes, aunt," she sighed; "if only we could tell him about us—write him that our uncertainty is allayed."

"Who can tell but that some wily and bold messenger may cross the line. What do you think, Landreau?"

"Well it isn't so easy, my lady. If it were nought but risking one's neck, mine's at your service; but those ruffianly Prussians keep watch and ward so close that not a mouse can slip through. I should only get caught without even the consolation of seeing Master Roger, for they would pack me off straight away to Germany, to say nothing of my being wanted here."

"Alas! he is right," said the old dame. "But look at what that child has written, Renée."

The mountebank's pupil had traced a few lines on a slate which the faithful Landreau had laid on the table. Renée took it from the writer's hands and read aloud these words which drew an exclamation of surprise from her:

"If you do not want me now, I will go to Saint-Germain and bring back M. de Saint-Senier."

XXXII.

"Poor child!" sighed Madame de Muire, "her devotion goes beyond her strength. I should never forgive myself if I consented to her exposing herself to the dangers of such a journey."

Régine's attentive eye watched all the impressions reflected on the speaker's countenance; no doubt divining that her generous offer was not accepted, she took back the slate and wrote again with feverish ardour. The younger lady had risen in much excitement, and watched the lines over her shoulder.

"What does she say?" inquired the countess.

"That we need 'fear nothing—the Prussians will not hurt me, I know their language and will tell their fortunes,'" read Renée.

"That's so," observed Landreau, "a woman has more chances of running the gauntlet by amusing those beery heads by sleight of hand tricks, than a man braving bullets."

"That may be," said Madame de Muire, "yet I cannot really allow her to risk her life again for Roger."

"Besides," added her niece, sadly, "even if she got through the lines, how could she bring back a wounded man, perchance a—a dying one—and tears cut short her speech."

"As for that, mademoiselle," said the old keeper, "I saw the lieutenant fall, and I am sure that he only got a knock-down blow from a musket

butt ; by the same token, I ran the German through who gave it him. Knocks on the head either kill or heal quickly, and I'll bet M. Roger will be taken out of the hospital one of these fine days to be sent to Germany."

"Who knows if we shall ever see him more," sobbed Renée. "Oh, heaven is cruelly trying our family!"

The aunt was silent in apparent thought.

"No, no," she said at length, "if any evil befell that afflicted one, I should reproach myself eternally. Besides it would pain me too much to see her resume her dreadful pursuit, even to save my nephew. Give her to understand that I oppose such rashness, and besides, we need her to finish what she has so well commenced."

Her niece wiped away her tears and wrote : "It cannot be. You are wanted here."

Régine read it at a glance, and hung her head in sorrow. Her bosom heaved with deep emotion, and her nervously shaking hands dropped the slate on the table.

"How she loves him !" said Madame de Muire, watching her with profound interest.

Renée's still moist eyes were lifted to hers.

"Not so well as you, I know, darling," said the old dame, smiling gently, "but I am really proud that our Roger inspires such devotion."

"He is so good," murmured the young lady.

"As good as handsome," returned the countess, "for he is truly of our race, and I find much resemblance to the portrait of your granduncle, Colonel de Saint-Senier. In uniform, particularly, it is striking," added she, scanning a *carte de visite*. "He is an enviable mate for you, my child."

"I never thought but of his heart alone," remarked the officer's betrothed, blushing.

"Good looks spoil nothing, my dear," said the old dame, who had the physical proclivities prevalent during the First Empire, "but I agree with you that Roger has many other merits, and as soon as this horrid war is over, we will have the marriage come off on my Burgundy estate."

"The future is very black," remarked Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier."

Her aunt took her hands, and was no doubt about to try and cheer her, when she suddenly called out instead :

"That poor thing is fainting. Landreau, some water, quick, and my salts—on the mantelpiece, there !"

Indeed, Régine had turned dreadfully pale, and seemed ready to swoon. Renée and the old servant hastened both to her ; but she rallied, with a violent internal effort, the blood rushed anew to her cheeks, and she indicated that the ailment had passed.

"I'm hanged ! I thought she was such a tough one !" grumbled Landreau under his breath. "But, after all, it's a way with these girls—they do go off for a yes or a no."

"She is worn out," said Madame de Muire, "and she must have rest. I will not have her scouring the city, and sitting up here of nights. We will watch in her stead, if we must, and we'll send Landreau out on occasion."

"My furlough lasts three days more ; besides, I will ask for an extension," observed the keeper.

"Take her to her room, friend," went on the countess. "Come along, my dear Renée, let us go up into the white room."

The strolling player rose at the same time as the dowager, seeming to be buried in thought. She let Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier kiss her, and mechanically took Landreau's proffered arm.

"Don't you fret, my lady," said he, "you can all sleep easy, for I go my rounds every night as if the garden were the Saint-Senier park."

The girl followed her guide, who conducted her with almost paternal attentions to the door of the room set apart as hers.

"Good night, pretty one," said he, ushering her in, "don't have any ugly dreams, and, above all, don't open the shutters. Hillo! here I am again talking to no purpose!" With which reproach, no new thing for him to make, Landreau made off, after carefully shutting the guest in.

Régine's room was long and narrow. Formerly, the apartment had been occupied by a man, probably by one of the Saint-Senier family, so sorely buffeted by fate since the siege began. Hunting trophies were still hanging on the wall, and some cigar-boxes were piled up on a dresser. An old figured tapestry divided this gallery converted into a sleeping chamber, and concealed the couch she had occupied these few weeks. A high fireplace, surmounted by an old mirror in carved wood, faced the hangings. A couple of candles, lit by Landreau, feebly illumined this long apartment, at the other end of which the shadows accumulated. Two windows opened at once on the garden, for it was on the ground floor, but the carefully-closed inner shutters intercepted all light and outside interference. Régine, leaning on the mantel, looked at Roger's photograph, which she had taken off the parlour table, and held tightly in her right hand. Neither of the ladies had noticed the quick movement by which she had snatched up the picture from beside her slate.

Since being left alone, her face had become transfigured, and her resigned bearing gave way to one of virile resolution. Her eyes glistened with unwonted brightness, her pale face was reddened, and her supple form was drawn up as though to meet a coming danger with erect head. From her bosom she drew a medallion, which she kissed several times before she resumed contemplating the lieutenant's portrait. Her lips moved as if she could speak, and tears soon trickled down her cheeks. After a few instants thus spent, she threw herself on her knees and prayed for a long while, leaning her chin on her clasped hands, which in turn rested on a table, where the thoughtful Landreau had placed books, writing materials, and other necessities for a young woman. Rising slowly, she walked to the window, which she opened with care to mask the candles, so that no rays should pass without.

It was a dark night, and a drizzle came on the west wind to beat against her face as she bent out to look at the garden. Not a thing stirred in that deserted enclosure, in the midst of which rose the pavilion so often scrutinised by Valnoir from his terrace. The stillness was the deeper as the fort batteries were silent that night. The beleaguered city seemed collecting itself after the battle, and the German guns, awaiting the recoil, had not yet again opened fire. One glance at the lawn and the lonely paths sufficed to encourage Régine. She hastened back to the table, and without taking time to sit down, she wrote with a trembling hand and at feverish speed these lines on a large sheet of paper:

"Forgive me for disobeying you: I go. I must save him or die. If I am not seen in five days, pray for me, and think sometimes of one who loves you and would be happy to yield up her life for you."

She signed it "Régine"—and then remained thoughtful a moment, as if

hesitating to add a family name. But almost at once she dashed down the pen, and shaking her head, as if to repel a thought assailing her, turned away towards the fire-place where the candles still burned on the marble shelf beside Roger's portrait. She extended her hand to take it up and put it as a talisman on her heart against hostile bullets, when she stopped petrified. In the looking-glass she beheld a man standing behind her.

XXXIII.

RÉGINE tried to cry out, but she was not given the time to do so. Before uttering that inarticulate sound which is the voice of deaf mutes, the unhappy girl was seized round the waist by two robust arms. At the same time, a second man, hidden behind the tapestry, sprang out upon her and clapped a handkerchief to her lips. The attack was so sudden and unforeseen, that Régine was overpowered and gagged without being able to defend herself. One of her assailants profited by her surprise to blow out the candles, and in the utter darkness suddenly filling the room, her only sense, that of sight, became useless. She closed her eyes and prepared for death.

"Away with her, and quick!" whispered the wretch who had first seized her.

"Wait till I get the paper she was writing," returned the other.

"What's the use?"

"Don't know—may be useful hereafter."

"Leave it alone and hurry up. That soldier animal may come prowling round here and we have no time to dawdle."

The two ruffians agreed on the necessity for promptitude, and Régine, lifted up in a strong grasp, was carried towards the casement.

"Done it?" asked a voice in the garden.

"Yes, citizen," answered one of the pair.

"Then lower away the piece of goods and let's hook it."

The passing out of the woman was achieved with a skill and rapidity that revealed great experience in nocturnal abductions. The window was not high above the ground, and the girl's frail body did not weigh much upon those stout hands. She was received in the arms of the confederate posted without; the two others jumped down on the grass without the least noise, took up the victim again, and the detestable gang went on their way. The night was blacker than ever, the wind had doubled in force, and the inhabitants of the pavilion must have been asleep, for no lights were to be seen nor a sound to be heard. The abductors seemed to know their way well, for they went round the house to the linden walk and reached the door in the wall speedily. They even possessed the secret to open it, for one of them had only to touch a spring to make the lock work. The Rue de Laval was completely deserted. By the hazy light of a far-off gas jet, one just descried a cab waiting at the corner of the hill of the Martyrs.

"I'll run ahead to say you are coming," said the man who had watched in the garden.

Since she had fallen into the grasp of unknown enemies, Régine had made no attempt to escape from them. One might have thought that fright had killed her, for her arms swung along her body and her head hung inert with dishevelled hair upon the chest of the ruffian carrying it. In a few hurried strides they reached the cab. The apparent leader was waiting, holding the door open.

"In with it!" he said in a harsh voice.

The order was executed with a dexterity which would have done honour to Calabrian brigands, and in the twinkling of an eye the girl, hurled in on the seat-cushions, found herself between two guards prepared to do their utmost to prevent her flight. She did not seem to think of it, and offered no resistance to the men seated, each in his corner. The one who had given orders to the driver meanwhile, also stepped in and the cab rolled off towards the junction of the Rue de Laval and the Rue de Bréda.

"Ha, ha, my boys! that's what I call a proper job," chuckled the personage they seemed to obey.

"But add that we were in luck, too," grumbled one of the under-strap-pers. "To find the kitchen door ajar, carpet on the stairs to save making a row, and a bit of cloth hung up in the room to hide us, I call that a bit of fat."

"To say nothing," went on the other, "of the girl being one that couldn't sing out or hear—why, half the work was done for us before hand."

"Ours is not yet over," said the chief of the expedition, laconically.

"By the way, M. Taupier," said the first ruffian, "tell us what we're to do with our piece of goods, as you call it?"

"Did not J. B. Frapillon tell you?"

"No, by thunder! the governor is just this sort: He says, 'You go and do so and so,' and we get about it and never ask any particulars."

"Oh, he's a smart fellow, you may be sure," resumed the other man, "but liberal when he is properly served. He called us in a fortnight ago to-morrow, and says he: 'My merry men, you must run the game to earth this week, and take it next. There's five hundred shiners for you if you bag it before the next fortnight, but I shall stop fifty a-day for every day beyond.'"

"So, as we have finished to-night, you won't have any forfeit to pay, my little lambs," remarked the Satanic humpback, who had undertaken the command of the operatives furnished by his friend, J. B. Frapillon.

"Then we have only to put the princess in a safe place."

"Just so, Mouchabeuf," pronounced Taupier, authoritatively.

"And where is this safe place, if I may ask?" queried the rascally owner of this pretty name.

"You will see in a quarter of an hour, judging by the pace our 'pal' on the box is driving his nags."

"How complete the governor is for any game!" exclaimed Mouchabeuf, in admiration: "carriages, horses, jarveys, anything to hand in his house, and turned out at a wink and a flick of the finger."

"That's all very well," commented the other rough fellow, "but it's lucky the girl is so good. If we had had a kicker and a screamer to deal with, it might have given us a bone to pick."

"Oh, hereabouts they go to roost as early as the chickens; we haven't seen three passers-by since we left the Place Pigalle."

On leaving the Rue de Laval, the cab had gone up to the outer boulevards and was now rolling in the direction of La Villette. Midnight had sounded long before, and none but belated drunkards were to be met in such deserted regions. The shed barracks run up in the middle of the roadway to house the country militia were not occupied that night on account of the sortie that morning, the troops that marched thence camping outside the fortifications.

"It looks as if we were going to leave our *baggage* at the government stores," said Mouchabeuf, grinning at his own pleasantry.

Indeed the vehicle approached the circular building marking the site of the old barrier of La Villette, and on the left rose the immense buildings constructed to warehouse goods brought by the canal. Régine still preserved the immobility of a statue, and might have been believed dead but for her hard breathing.

"Since she keeps quiet, we can remove the handkerchief, which must deucedly hinder her breathing," said the facetious agent, who seemed to carry into the exercise of his new functions all the humanity compatible with his duty toward his redoubtable master, J. B. Frapillon.

"Not worth the trouble now," rejoined Taupier curtly; "we have arrived."

"So I guessed it?" queried Mouchabeuf.

"You 'burn' but you are not quite hot, my old *Lascar*," replied the humpback, turning to open the window and pull the driver by his coat-tail.

"To the off side, eh?" asked the latter.

"Yes; but whip up a little and keep straight on till I drum on the glass."

The cab left the boulevard to go down a steep incline from the circus to the canal quay.

"It looks as if we were going on board a barge now," remarked the joking agent; "this just suits me—I always was fond of the sea!"

"You are too fanciful, citizen," said Taupier, "it will be your ruin some day."

Whilst speaking, the humpback looked out of the door-window and attentively observed the road they were taking. The pavement had become very uneven, and the vehicle, none too well hung on springs, roughly jolted the adventurers on a none-frequented way. At intervals on the right rose low houses separated by wood-yards or connected by long grey walls. On the left extended the canal bank covered with empty casks and utterly deserted. The massive coal barge hulks did not come up above the ledge, and nothing was to be heard except the monotonous patter of the water dripping through the sluices. The war had stopped navigation, and the custom-house officers, usually guarding the strand, had taken muskets and gone to guard the ramparts. After a few minutes' more bone-shaking, the conveyance arrived before a ruined shed, where work had long been left off. No other building appeared beyond this dilapidated structure, and, whichever way one looked, Paris might be believed miles away, so silent and solitary was the road. Taupier tapped smartly on the pane, and the vehicle was stopped short.

"Here we are, fanciful Mouchabeuf," said he with the chuckle he favoured on grave occasions. "Open the box, skip out on the sod, and offer your arm to the damsel whom we will hand out to you."

"Better get her out by the other door," observed the methodical agent. "We will have less ground to carry her over to the warehouse on the right. A queer storehouse, anyhow."

"Do as you are bid without argument," returned the humpback roughly; "we are not going that way."

"Excuse me! I thought you had found a cellar there for the girl. And there's nothing but the canal on the other side."

"That's just what I am looking for," replied Taupier, bursting out into laughter.

XXXIV.

"THE canal ! What have we to do with the canal ?" repeated the stupefied Mouchabeuf.

"Will you open, hang you !" squeaked the humpback. "We are losing our time, and I can explain it better on the waterside."

The hireling decided to obey. He jumped out and Taupier followed, saying to the other acolyte :

"Stay, and don't let the girl move till I come back."

The advice was superfluous, for Régine had not stirred. Only her eyes showed life, and the ruffian guarding her was more than once struck by their fire.

"Come with me," said the humpback, abruptly, shaking Mouchabeuf's arm.

"Coming, general ; but where to ?"

"To reconnoitre, pretty soldier that you are !"

The humpback briskly climbed over the iron chain separating the road from the landing-quay and walked straight to the canal. Mouchabeuf, who had been in the army, kept step with him militarily, but he mumbled :

"This chap with the hump on his back can't mean to— Odsbobs ! that would be going beyond a joke."

Taupier stopped at the canal bank, and leaned over to study the spot. It was capitally chosen. The dark, deep water was almost flush with the stone ; not a boat anywhere near, not a light as far as eye could see.

"A lock yonder—another lower down !" muttered the deformed one. Before navigation is resumed, the Prussians must raise the siege, and that is a far cry. By all that's jolly, I have had a lucky hand here ! This nice basin is like a letter-box : anything can be dropped in, and it will keep its secrets."

The satellite furnished by J. B. Frapillon observed his captain's movements with visible disquietude.

"Quick !" said Taupier, suddenly, "get back to the cab, collar the parcel with your mate, and fetch it here."

Mouchabeuf held his ground, as if his feet had taken root in the granite quay pavement.

"Are you deaf, like that jade ? Are such infirmities catching ?" jeered the humpback.

"I hear plain," said the myrmidon, without budging ; "but if it isn't troubling you too much, I want to know before I fetch the girl what you want her brought for."

"You're too curious ! What business can it be of yours ?"

"I want to know !"

"The girl is tired, and we are going to send her to sleep down there," said Taupier, indicating the canal.

"I thought so."

"So much the better. That will save you any surprise. Only look alive. I hate lingering misery."

"This job's not coming off," said Mouchabeuf, coolly.

"Who will hinder it ?" challenged the humpback, menacingly.

"I'm the man."

"I must be dreaming," squeaked Taupier, furiously. "Look here; are you paid or not by Frapillon to help me get rid of a nuisance of a girl?"

"Let's get this thing straight. I am hired to carry her off—that's my game; but killing her is not. Nobody ever said a word about that, and I do not mix myself up with such work."

"Very well; now I understand. You find this is an extra not paid for, and you want supplementary pay. All right! I am a liberal soul, and I will speak to your governor to change the five hundred franc note into a thousand one. So, away you go now!"

"Not for a thou., nor yet ten thou.," said Mouchabeuf, shaking his head. "I do not care to end my days under the guillotine cleaver on the Place de la Roquette."

"Fool! the death penalty is going to be abolished. It is contrary to morality, and I write every day in my paper to put it down."

This assurance, offered mockingly by the odious-twisted man, had not the power to convince Mouchabeuf.

"Very likely," he returned, coldly. "And meanwhile I am going to stick to my trade. I will help you carry the girl roundabout anywhere except into the canal."

"I shall tumble her in without your help, you triple fool," squeaked Taupier, wildly. "Your mate will not be so tender, and I am sure of the driver. 'Sling your hook,' and the quicker the better! we can dispense with your services."

Whilst venting his choler, the speaker turned towards the vehicle; but, instead of departing his own way, Mouchabeuf stuck to him and reached it as soon as he. The cabman had got down, and was standing by his horses. He was a tall, strapping fellow who had evidently only donned the uniform of the General Cab Company for the nonce, and was framed for all kinds of nocturnal expeditions. The man left in the vehicle was sharing his attention between the still quiescent Régine and the mcandering Taupier.

"I say, you two, are you game to lend me a hand?" queried the latter.

"Game for any mortal thing, if I can," said the Jehu, in a drawling tone revealing his Norman origin. "What's on the board?"

"Pinion the wench inside there, and bring her over yonder on the quay. I'll take care of the rest, and there's fifty louis between you, for this fool here turns us up."

"That makes fifty *pistoles* a-piece," calculated the driver, clearly shaken.

"Ready money down," added Taupier, clinking some gold in his fob.

"Faith, it's about my style," said the Norman, without actually agreeing.

Mouchabeuf witnessed the dreadful bargaining to its conclusion motionlessly; he had folded his arms as if in meditation.

"Why do you refuse to stand in?" inquired the man in the cab, in an undertone.

"Because, in the first place, I don't want to get my head slipped off," replied the agent of the general-agent with a vehemence that testified to an attachment to life.

"Stuff! if you aren't seen, you won't be shortened."

"And then again, because I look to the governor only in this job, and he never breathed a word of this. He told me to dog the young one—I did dog her till I ran to earth; he told me to have her out, and out she is; all this falls into my line, but the canal—*nicht!* as the Prussians say when they mean no go. This is saying nothing either about the want of proof, that it will please the governor."

"What's that ? truly. Don't you believe he knows—"

"If you take my advice, you'll keep outside the row."

If Régine really heard this dreadful dialogue in which her mode of death was debated, she must have been strong-minded beyond her sisters, for she never winced, and the man who held her arm did not feel her shudder. As for the humpback, he quivered with rage, and his contorted features changed with twitches in a succession of hideous faces. He felt that his prey was escaping him, and in his villainously fertile brain, he hunted for an argument capable of removing the out of place scruples of his followers.

"My lads," he said, in a fatherly tone, "I thought you up to the mark ; but after all, you are not a bad lot, and I do not object proving to you as clear as day that it is too late to hang back."

"It is never too late to avoid Article 302 of the Criminal Code," muttered Mouchabeuf, who knew the law.

"I daresay !" sneered Taupier, "but you who are so versed in the application of capital punishment, do you know what they serve out for complicity ?"

"Articles 59 and 60, of course !"

"Good ! well, suppose that I take away the girl somewhere, under my roof or Frapillon's, for instance, and settle her without you. Do you believe, you great expert in the laws, that the trip to which you have contributed your presence, will be to the taste of the public prosecutor who takes up the case ?"

This argument, already tried on Valnoir, produced effect again.

"But M. Taupier," said the staggered Mouchabeuf, "are you set upon—upon suppressing the girl ?"

"I have not paid for her removal merely to see the colour of her eyes."

"They are beautiful enough to be worth it," commented the agent, "but, never mind ! there's another way out of it. Suppose she is simply locked up in a strong well-barred room, of which there are plenty to be found ?"

"Yes," said the humpback, ironically, "a cage which the ladies of the pavilion will find out some fine day and let out the bird. Then, amiable Mouchabeuf, look out for the code !"

"Oh, it's not a singing-bird, and she can't kick up a row."

"Do you believe that, ass ?"

"Besides, there are mad-houses, and she can be easily shoved in as cranky, with her look like a sleep-walker from those rolling eyes. I have worked at supplying those asylums and I have got women locked up that were sounder than her."

"No good ! a played-out dodge. Besides, one of these days, the Germans will take Charenton, and let out the crack-brains," said the humpback, laughing at his own inhuman joke. "It will only be so many more editors for the opposition press."

Mouchabeuf was scratching his pole as if dumbfounded. Taupier did not leave him time to offer any more arguments.

"My lambs, methinks it's a settled thing ?" said he to the two willing myrmidons.

The coachman nodded, approvingly, and the other made no objection.

"Then up she goes and over ! Have you no rope about, driver ?"

"Surely yes—in the boot."

"Good ! hand it me ; I am going to bear a hand at the work myself, because you won't buckle to, you pack of lazybones !"

The unfortunate Régine's fate was decided on, and the horrible operation

was executed in a twinkling. It was the humpback who undertook the pinioning and did it without her attempting resistance. Mouchabeuf had seated himself on the suspended chain, serving as barrier to the quay, trembling in every limb. The two others watched at the doors.

"Done," said Taupier; "take her."

The scoundrels obeyed. Régine was lifted out and transported to the waterside. She could only clasp her bound hands and raise her eyes to the skies. She was praying.

XXXV.

"**HERE!**" said Taupier, bending over the canal parapet, "this is a capital place!"

The dismal party slowly crossed the quay, and Régine, carried between the rogues whom the humpback had won over, had but a few seconds to live. Mouchabeuf had let the preliminaries of the murder go on without taking any part in it. The body had grazed him on its way by, and the contact made him spring up. The fellow had had a hand in many disgraceful and shameful deeds in J. B. Frapillon's service, but he did not like crimes which led men to the scaffold. He had long maintained that there are degrees in wickedness, and that the race of rogues is divided into several categories which should not confound their special features. Mouchabeuf drew the line at cold-blooded murder. All Taupier's eloquence had not prevailed over him, and though the atrocity was so near consummation, he was still cudgeling his brain for a means of converting the dangerous act into a mere misdemeanour. The view of the victim, so fair and resigned, may also have touched the hardened heart. Whether terror or weakness, the sentiment urging him to save Régine gave him inspiration. He had mechanically followed his more savage comrades who had consented to carry the girl to death, and he had time to throw himself between them and the horrid deformed man who hovered over the black and muddy water like a vulture on a grave's edge.

"Drop it!" cried he, barring the road to the procession, "I am not going to have her killed."

Taupier started and tried to take him by the collar, but the agent was the better man and easily knocked aside the abortion.

"You shall pay me for this, you scamp!" gasped the humpback panting. "I will have Frapillon discharge you, and if you do not die of want, I myself will send you below to the worms."

The hesitating carriers deposited their burden on the stones.

"Excuse me, M. Taupier," said Mouchabeuf, "but I only go against you for our mutual good, and I'll lay my head that the governor would rather have the job end my way."

The humpback gnashed his teeth without saying anything. He had not the physical strength to dispute with the bully who unexpectedly foiled his frightful designs, and he sought some way to secure the alliance of the other pair.

"I have an idea, look you," resumed the scrupulous rascal.

"Oh, curse your ideas!" snarled Taupier.

"This is not like my others, and, as true as I stand here, if it won't suit you—"

"Go on?" said the humpback.

"Well, if it won't suit, I won't offer any further objection and you can do what you like."

"Say it quick, then!"

"You are not putting the girl in the canal for the sheer pleasure of killing her, eh?"

"No. Get on!"

"Only to keep her from being found by the ladies of the pavilion?"

"And to keep her from coming into—my way and my friends."

"Good! well, I have hit on the means of doing all this without risking more than six months' gaol."

"Yes, the barred window—the madhouse; you said that before, my grand inventor. Invent something else if you want me to listen to you."

"I have done so."

"Impossible!"

"Look here, suppose she is sent off into a country whence she'll never come back?"

"None but the dead ever go away without returning."

"It's as good as the Indies or China—"

"It's too far off to put her on board ship at Havre or Nantes. I'd rather give her a sail on the canal," said the atrocious villain.

"Where I send her, she can go by land."

"Whereabout's? skip to the end."

"Prussia."

"Are you mad or hoaxing me, you animal?" screamed the enraged Taupier.

"Neither one nor the other; this is serious."

"Go to blazes! I have had enough of your flummery."

"Will you listen?"

"No! I would rather let the mix go, and cut away to my home. She will return to the pavilion, accuse you, and you will be copped like the imbecile you are, whilst I shall be clear for I am going out of Paris by the balloon."

"Nobody will get copped, if you will let me work it. I have only one trick up my sleeve, but it's a dead-sure thing, and I only ask you a couple of minutes to show it."

"Oh, dash it all! have done," squeaked the exasperated crookback.

"Perhaps the governor will not like it, but so much the worse for him. I shall tell all."

"You are hoarding it up, for here's a quarter of an hour gone and we have heard nothing of it yet."

"Do you know Rueil?" demanded Mouchabeuf, without being dismayed at Taupier's sneers.

"Yes."

"Do you know what's going on there?"

"I know there was fighting to-day—we got beaten."

"I don't know anything about to-day, but generally Rueil is neutral ground where we can chat with the Prussians as comfortably as we are chatting now."

"I don't care a straw, and if this is all you have to tell me—"

"Let me get through. You cannot come to a conclusion before. Since I have been in business these twenty years I have saved up, and I placed my savings there. I am fond of angling, and when work's slack in Paris, you understand—"

The humpback quivered with impatience.

"This is by way of informing you that I bought the lease and stock of a tavern a good bit away on the Bougival road, and since the siege I have had leisure to cultivate acquaintance with the spiked helmets."

"What new tune are you striking up? you are always here," remarked Taupier, becoming more heedful.

"Not altogether," said Mouchabeuf cunningly, "I go and see my place at least three times a-week on my private business, and also on the governor's commissions."

"Oho! does Frapillon send you on errands to the Prussians?"

"Oh, it's quite innocent, bless you! I carry a few newspapers which they pay rather dear for, it's true. They give me theirs in exchange, and the governor buys them from me, at a stiff price, that's true, too—but all of us make something out of it."

"And where does this pretty traffic go on?"

"In my shop. We have the business arranged beautifully smooth. Each party has his fixed hours, and they never meet. When the French sharpshooters come out for a liquor at my counter, the Prussians get the warning from our videttes, and then there's no fear of them showing their noses. Only, as soon as our boys stagger off, they drop in and I can tell you that a quart of schnapps does not scare any man of them."

"That's a good thing to know," muttered the humpback, "and when citizen Frapillon treads on my toes—But," continued he aloud, "I do not see how your hobnobbing with the enemy helps me?"

"Yet it's clear enough; you want to get rid of the girl and you ask nothing more than never to see her again?"

"That would do."

"Well, I undertake to hand her over to the Germans myself, who will not let her go, I promise you."

"Nonsense! those fellows do not want to be bothered with women."

"They will take any mortal thing. I lately smuggled a couple of vocalists through whom they took on to Saint-Germain to start a music hall with them."

"But this one cannot sing, you dunce!"

"Don't be afraid. I will hatch up some story with a chum of mine there, one Corporal Tichdorf, of the Pomeranian Fusileers. He is a lad who will understand a nod as well as a wink when thalers are shown him, and I promise you he will pack her off so far that she will never hamper you again."

Taupier had ceased to dance about and was listening to Mouchabeuf's later explanations with some calmness.

"Who will guarantee your doing what you propose?" inquired he after a pause.

"Come along with me if you like, you can witness the conclusion of the matter, and so be quite sure that I do not deceive you."

"But when and how am I to go to Rueil, particularly with such a piece of goods?"

"Don't let that distress you. The gates are shut now but they will be open at seven. I have a chaise put up at Les Ternes, which we have plenty of time to reach at a trot in the cab. Once there, we will transfer the girl into my chaise; the livery stable keeper knows me and will not trouble about what I put into my trap. At day-break, we will leave by the Neuilly gate and be at my house by noon."

"Unless the sweet National Guards stop us on the road."

"I have a pass for three persons. We shall slide through as smoothly as if we were travelling first class on the railway."

"But if the girl sets the guards or passers-by upon us?"

"She can only wriggle her hands about. And my chaise has a hood and we'll put her in the back. Besides, I am known on the road, and at a pinch I'll say she is a daft niece of mine."

"But when we get out there, the Prussians will not be on the spot to take her."

"No, for they only come at night, but I have a fine close cellar with a padlock, where we will box her in, and my man Polyte, a stout chap, will guard her."

Taupier was walking up and down the quay with unsteady steps.

"I cannot help myself," he muttered between his teeth, "these bandits will not obey me. Oh, well, lug her back into the cab; and let us be off to Les Ternes."

The two ruffians did not want urging; the quotations from the Criminal Code had given them food for thought. The still lifeless Régine was again seated in the conveyance which turned round to reach the boulevard.

"I like the canal best," grumbled the humpback, "it was handier and surer."

XXXVI.

MOUCHABEUF had spoken the truth. His wine-shop was certainly, during the siege, the most frequented establishment in the village of Rueil. Not that it looked so, for it would have been hard to find in all the environs of Paris an uglier den. Built with odds and ends, the timber-work, formed of the beams and joists of demolished town houses, this unpleasant structure took the shape of an oblong square of one storey. On the ground floor, almost entirely occupied by a long hall for the customers, there was also a narrow box, which the ingenious owner had turned into a general shop. On the upper floor there were two or three rooms, supposed to be furnished, which might accommodate persons nowise dainty for a night. Externally, the building was painted yellow, and ornamented with blood-red doors and shutters. A scanty garden, where lettuces and carrots sprouted up higgledy-piggledy, completed the attractions of this rural resort. In a corner of this kitchen garden Mouchabeuf had built up, with sleepers stolen after the closing of the railway, an arbour for sheltering the toppers who liked imbibing in the open air. He even carried practical economy so far as to fatten rabbits there, which escaped French and German campfire cookery by being under the protection of a huge dog, chained within reach of their hutch.

The vogue of the tavern did not arise from the quality of the solid or liquid articles sold in it. The wine came direct from the adjacent but ill-famed vineyards of Suresnes; the brandy, distilled by some petty liquor-manufacturer, was heightened with pepper, and the beer contained more liquorice than hops. As for the comestibles filling the shop, they were of varied kinds but of detestable quality.

The proprietor sold Hamburg havannahs of genuine cabbage leaves, tallow candles that would smoke up a plague, and second-hand club-cards which would have furnished enough grease to make soup. It was an im-

mense assortment of worthless rubbish. And yet the Yellow House vended everything at its weight in gold, and the two main rooms hardly held the customers. The secret of this preference was quite simple, and the prosperity was based solely on the privileged position the establishment occupied.

Situated at the extremity of the village, and between the outposts of the two armies, the shed was quite isolated. It had two entrances, one on the highway, and the other on the garden which went down to the Seine, a deep cellar where surprises were not to be dreaded, and a pigeon loft which commanded a far view. If it had been erected purposely for war, it would not have been different, and Mouchabeuf had not been backward in utilising so many advantages. The surreptitious trade he carried on was not unknown to the civil and military authorities, who winked at it on certain conditions. Besides the clandestine traffic which he pursued on his employer's account—we allude to the respectable J. B. Frapillon—Mouchabeuf often enough provided useful information obtained from German officers in return for presents of real cigars from Cuba and authentic champagne of which he had a secret store. He was suspected, as the saying goes, of carrying water on both shoulders, but it is a common fault with spies, and all that could be done was to watch him close.

During the frequent absences of the master, the establishment was kept by a waiter, twenty-five or thirty years old, gifted with enormous biceps and a shock head of hair which reminded one of Samson's, the vanquisher of the Philistines. This robust and unpolished gentleman might have completed the likeness by using a jaw-bone against recalcitrant toppers, for in his leisure he followed the profession of knacker, and cut up the animals killed on the battlefield or elsewhere. This calling provided his private income, and Mouchabeuf generously allowed him the product from vending horse-steaks and mule legs, for which he found low-life epicures. Moreover, he ran errands to Rueil and Nanterre, served as ferryman over the river in a leaky punt moored at the end of the garden, and fed the watch-dog and the rabbits. This factotum of the suburbs answered to the name of Polyte.

On the morrow of the night when Régine had been stolen away, he had had plenty to do all day. The battle had brought around the wine-shop numerous squads of ambulance-bearers and bands of stragglers who did not miss dropping in at the bar. Shop and taproom had not lacked customers for an instant, and Polyte had to multiply himself, which finally went against his grain. More than once, he deplored the absence of his master, gone away two days and due that morning. Evening drew nigh, and the active fellow the more and more regretted not seeing Mouchabeuf arrive, as he was wishful to go back to the horses on the field. To lose the windfall of the sanguinary action of La Malmaison was not to Polyte's taste, knowing that there was no lack of competition, and delaying his survey caused him to risk being cut out by the irregulars, inveterate hippophagists, and particular about choice bits.

The melancholy task of the ambulances was terminated and the crowd of customers had considerably lessened, but half-a-dozen insatiate swillers still stuck in the main room, and the faithful waiter would have thought himself undutiful if he neglected to keep an eye on them. He had been instructed to mistrust customers supplied to the Yellow House by the outposts, and those who were just then drinking at the counter were not persons to whom unlimited credit should be given. Hence, Polyte confined his absences to

short peeps out of the doorway without losing sight of his dubious customers. He could alternately scan the Rueil road, whereon he hoped to see Mouchabeuf's chaise appear, and breathe the anything but sweet air from the battlefield, where he itched to be collecting his meat.

"It's precious funny," he growled. "Here it is after four, and no signs of the master. He must have heard the cannons and know I have my work cut out, or rather to cut out."

"Polyte! let's have another stiff 'un. Look alive, you confounded poisoner," chorussed the revellers.

"Coming," replied the waiter, re-entering.

"Hurrah for Polyte!" shouted the crew in harmony.

"What do you want now? You ought to have got your fill."

Indeed, the noisy fellows appeared sufficiently inebriated. There were five of them clad in a bizarre costume composed of sky-blue trousers, a red waist-band, a black vest faced with jonquil braid, and a pointed hat ornamented with a cock's feather. All they lacked was the velvet cloak to realise the type of Fra Diavolo. The fancy brigand dress did not appear at all to abash them, and it was plain that they believed in the absurdity; but military discipline could not be their strong point, to judge by their familiarity towards their leader. This was a tall fellow, heavily gold-laced on the sleeves, about forty years old, with short hair, pointed beard and curled moustache. He did not scorn to drink with his men, and seemed to seek no other superiority over them than in the number of drinks absorbed.

"To the success of the Forlorn Hope of the Rue Maubuée!" roared this captain of free-drinkers, as he tossed off at a draught the fresh bumper poured out by Polyte's dirty hand.

The privates repeated the toast with a "hurrah" which would have done credit to an English corporal's guard.

"I tell you what, boys," resumed the much belaced warrior in the maudlin tone peculiar to the tipsy, "if they had only listened to me, we would not have been polished off again yesterday."

"Those staff officers, mark you, commander, are all a lot of good-for-nothings," said one of the Forlorn Hope, placing his glass portentously upon the pewter bar.

"The attack by the whole army, my old wardogs, by the entire force, that's all the tactics I know," said the strategist convincingly; "let them only give me some morning three thousand daredevils of your brand, and we would sleep in Versailles the same night. Polyte! some rum punch to rinse out our muzzles with," shouted he by way of affirmation to this audacious pledge.

But Polyte was not listening. He had heard the far-off rolling of wheels and had run to the door.

"The governor!" he muttered, shielding his eyes with his hand. "He must be bringing a fine stock of goods by the way the shay is loaded down."

It was indeed Mouchabeuf's turn-out which was coming along the Rueil road, at the dreary trot of a grey whose thinness had presumably saved him from the culinary enterprises of the knackers. The proprietor of the Yellow House, sitting in between the splashboard and the seat, himself drove the piece of crow-bait, and by dint of laying on the whip, urged it up to the wine-shop.

"Come on, Polyte," he cried as he jumped down; "I have company—lend me a hand to help them out."

"Here I am, governor! it's a lucky thing you have come home this evening."

"Have you a lot of customers?"

"Five or six soakers, that's all."

"Get rid of 'em quietly—we have work before us to-night," whispered Mouchabeuf.

"I say, friend," called Taupier who had alighted, "come and get this baggage out. I want to stretch my legs a bit," he continued, making towards the house as quickly as his knockknees would permit.

"Ha! a woman! and a beauty too!" ejaculated Polyte, letting down the step.

A muttered exclamation answered him.

"Podensac! I am unlucky, dash it all!" growled the humpback who had run up against the chief of the Forlorn Hope in the doorway.

XXXVII.

"ZOUNDS! Taupier!" at the same time shouted the leader of the irregulars.

The humpback would have given much to have avoided this encounter and blamed his weakness in allowing it to come about.

"This comes from letting idiots talk me over," he snarled as he instinctively recoiled as if to beat a retreat.

"What the mischief are you here for? have you joined the Geneva Cross beggars?" inquired Podensac merrily.

"I'll tell you all about it presently," said Taupier, feeling the impossibility of escaping and already devising an excuse.

Mouchabeuf witnessed this colloquy from a distance, and with his experience as a private inquiry agent, divined that the meeting was disagreeable to him by whom he was temporarily employed. Hence he made an attempt to prevent Régine showing herself. He ran back to the vehicle, but he arrived too late, for the girl had leaned upon the obliging Polyte's shoulder and was lightly leaping to the ground. She did not appear either frightened or even astonished. During the drive, she had been freed of her bonds and the handkerchief closing her mouth, which proved that her captors did not distrust her any more.

"Good, good, I see!" chuckled the Forlorn Hope commander, perceiving Régine. "It looks, citizen Taupier, as if we were getting on with the fair sex!"

"Mind your own business," returned the humpback, roughly.

"Tush, don't fly out, you savage lady-killer, and come and have a modest quencher with us. There's none but the right sort here, and you may bring along your own particular choice."

"I am not thirsty," objected Taupier, still seeking a plausible lie, and finding none to cover his trip to Rueil in feminine company.

"But—my sword and revolvers!" exclaimed Podensac, "I believe I am not mistaken—the pretty girl you have in tow is—of course it is! she is our acquaintance of Saint-Germain, the showman's pupil."

The humpback grinned horribly, but answered never a word. A man cannot think of everything and, in his first surprise, he had utterly forgotten that the freelance captain and Régine had previously met under circumstances that they might not have forgotten. The situation was

becoming complicated, and the astute Taupier already queried if it would not save trouble to let Podensac into part of his confidence. The Gascon's morality was sufficiently known to him for him to attempt the trial without embarrassment, for his connection with him dated from far back, and he had pretty exact information as to his civil and military life.

The dashing Podensac had been in the regular army as a sub-lieutenant, and had gone through several honourable campaigns, for his sin of omission was not as regarded brave deeds, but ill-luck would have it that on returning from the Crimea, the recently promoted officer was appointed regimental paymaster. It was his ruin. He was fond of absinthe and the ladies; his pay was as light as his principles, and after one year of garrison life, some errors in his accounts obliged him to send in his resignation. After this fully merited catastrophe, the ex-sub-lieutenant practised successively a number of crafts, of which the most honest was certainly the one which brought him into constant connection with Taupier. Turn by turn assistant to a finder of substitutes for drafted rich men's sons, writer of company prospectuses, and outside speculator at the Bourse, Podensac had finally become a promoter's jackal, and, by this means, he had long supplied *Financial News* to the fourth page of the sheet into which the humpback discharged his prose. Latterly, his fortunes had taken a turn, and his buzzing about the far from aristocratic surroundings of the Rue Maubuee had won him the command of a band recruited there. The exercise of this dignity had not sheared away any of his favourite tastes, but he had acquired some useful acquaintances, and it was the chance commission at the outposts which secured him the honour of being M. de Saint-Senier's second. Only an instant was needed by Taupier to recall all these details, and he was about to exert his influence to entangle the volunteer captain when the latter walked into the snare of his own volition.

"I understand, now," observed he slyly, "the little one has captivated you because she is as pretty as a butterfly, and then again because she is dumb. Nothing to fear from tittle-tattle—an excellent virtue for a politician as high-aiming as you."

The humpback judiciously thought it better not to undeceive him than to embark in dangerous confidences.

"Upon my word, there's no hiding anything from you," he said, with a resigned nod, and reckoning that Régine would have neither the time nor the possibility of denial.

"And that's how we came out for a little dinner at Old Mouchabeuf's, eh?" went on the commander of irregulars, roaring with laughter.

"Well, if so, there's no law against it!"

"No, by thunder! and I like it all the better as I have four good fellows of my legion with me. We will have a jollification that won't leave a dish or a bottle untouched, and I include you, your Dulcinea, and the landlord of this rum-mill."

"Thank you, old chap, but I believe the girl is tired, and would rather have a rest. Besides, you know, she does not shine by her conversational powers, and we shall have fun enough without her."

"Come on in anyhow, we'll see about the rest afterwards," said Podensac, shoving back his invincibles into the wine-shop, the dialogue having drawn them out on the threshold.

Nothing of it had been heard by Polyte or his master busied in extracting a multitude of things from the chaise, and Mouchabeuf, on seeing Taupier merrily chatting with Podensac, concluded that all was going off

nically. As for Régine, she slowly paced the road, without the least show of fear or dismay, and the humpback, watching her movements out of the corner of his eye, applauded the resolution he had just taken. He went up to her to offer his hand gallantly, and lead her to the house, but not without saying to Mouchabœuf, as he went by, these significant words:

"Come directly you get through, and get rid of these fellows as soon as you can."

The entrance of the ill-matched couple was hailed by Podensac's acclamations, he having arrived at that stage of inebriety when there is a need of making a noise in company.

"Look here, my boys!" he shouted, "I present to you citizen Taupier, a first-class journalist, and his wife, a celebrated actress."

"What on earth is a journalist?" queried an illiterate desperado of the Rue Maubuée.

"It means that the citizen writes in the sound sort of newspapers. It's he who gets up the 'Serpenteau.'"

"True red, eh?" said the scout.

"Ay, but he does not ride the high horse for all that. You'll see how he'll load up in our company. What, ho! Polyte, where's that rum-punch we ordered?"

"Here you are, sir!" roared the waiter, at that very moment bringing in a capacious salad-bowl, in which smoked a burning liquor.

Mouchabœuf had remained without to put up the chaise and manage other matters. The appearance of the punch was uproariously greeted by the warriors, and Podensac set to filling the glasses with a tin ladle. Taupier joined in without further pressing, and carried impudence so far as to offer Régine a glass. She had gone to sit upon one of the common-room benches, where her almost smiling countenance nowise expressed disquiet, such as the scene ought to have caused her. She gently declined the glass with a wave of the hand, to imply she was not thirsty, but she evinced no anger at the familiarity. Her calmness began to astound and perplex her captor, who always took alarm at what he did not understand.

"I don't think the beauty is any too sweet upon you," remarked Podensac, naturally given to chaffing the deformed man.

"Quite as much as I want," returned the latter, tossing his head. "Moreover, I warned you that she was not delightful in society."

"By thunder! you are right. I was forgetting it," said the commander, "she is mute—"

"And deaf into the bargain; so don't keep on the curb chain."

"Of course! I knew that on the day of the duel, when I came back from Saint-Germain in her master's van. By the way, what's become of that brawny fellow and his long idiot of a clown?"

"I believe they have gone into something else," answered Taupier, with indifference.

"What a shame she cannot talk. I would have asked her what they did with the dead man."

"I thought you went all the way with them."

"Up to Rueil, yes; and we were nearly netted by the Uhlans; but on reaching our lines, I left them to join my men who were over by Colombes."

The girl had not appeared surprised to see Podensac; but she kept her eyes on him and seemed to follow the words on his lips. At the moment

when the leader of the Forlorn Hope expressed regret at his inability to question her, she took from a bag hanging at her waist a quantity of ivory counters and spread them out on the table.

"By thunder, an alphabet!" ejaculated Podensac; "that's her way of carrying on a talk."

"You let her alone," said Taupier, vexedly. "She hasn't her head screwed on the right way, and I won't have her worried. What an ass not to think of that," he added, mentally.

Whilst he was looking for the complaisant Mouchabeuf to notify him to deliver him from the irregular sharpshooters, Régine rose, walked directly up to their chief, and taking his left hand, set to scanning the lines with profound attention.

"Here's a lark, boys!" shouted Podensac, cracking with laughter, "the witch is going to tell me my fortune!"

XXXVIII.

"SHE is mad!" snarled Taupier.

The turn the adventure was taking was weird enough to justify his amazement. After the rupture by the canal, when he had accepted Mouchabeuf's proposition, he foresaw grave difficulties in its execution. Yet Régine had not opposed any resistance, and when within an inch of death at the waterside, she had not even uttered a sigh. Up to now, Taupier had accounted for the motive of this passiveness: defence was useless—a woman could not contend against four men, and help was impossible; at such an hour and place nobody was nigh. Moreover, the girl's antecedents testified to the strength of her temper. It was not surprising, therefore, that she chose her course heroically to die. But however resigned the victim might be, it was little likely that, in the long drive from La Villette to Rueil, she would abstain from taking advantage of any chances of safety that offered. There were the gate-wards to pass, a frequented highway to follow, Neuilly bridge to cross before the guards charged to collect the passes. Régine might, if not raise her voice, raise a disturbance and become noticed through her desperate gestures, and so the humpback expected.

In the transfer effected at the stables at Les Ternes, he had taken every precaution. Placed in the depths of the vehicle, and closely watched, the girl found it impossible to show a finger to the passers-by, and in case the soldiers examined the interior, Taupier reckoned on the search being perfunctory through the notoriety Mouchabeuf enjoyed in that district. In order to avoid awkward explanations, he had sent back the cab to J. B. Frapillon, for it was an unusual vehicle to be seen at the outposts; also his driver and the other agent, unprepossessing strangers for the natives of Rueil. But to his boundless surprise all these minute cares were superfluous. When Régine was freed of the gag which could not be left on without awkward questions of the livery stable keeper, not only had she never sought to soften him by gesture or tears, but she had tranquilly stood in a corner whilst the chaise was got ready as if she avoided being noticed.

On the road her conduct was the same. Sitting up motionless in the hooded part, she had not once tried to lift the leather to peep out, and during the obligatory search on Neuilly Bridge, she had shrunk behind Taupier. And farther on when, on leaving Courbevoic, progress was interrupted by the cross traffic arising from the recent action, and thev

had had to wait till the ambulance waggons and army service vans lumbered by, Régine had not stirred, convenient as was the occasion for attracting the attention of the soldiery. Finally, on approaching Rueil, Taupier fancied that his captive's face brightened up as well as her eyes, as if she delighted in having been carried away. Still he did not ponder upon this highly improbable supposition, being rather inclined to believe that fright had affected his victim's brain; and though he had a brief qualm on perceiving Podensac, he no longer doubted that she had gone mad till he saw her look at the commander's hand.

The girl had gently drawn the latter towards the table where her alphabetical counters were laid out, and she made him seat himself beside her on the wooden form. Podensac had yielded as if the incident were a capital bit of sport. His men shared in his gaiety and grouped around the pretty soothsayer, with quizzings in dubious taste. Taupier alone did not laugh, and his care-worn brow revealed that he distrusted Régine.

"The mad have lucid intervals," he thought, "and I do not care to have this stupid Podensac in my game."

He looked again towards the door to see if Mouchabent was not coming to his help, but there was no one but the waiter about, and he was dangling round the counter. The Boniface was probably in the stable, and Polyte little recked what went on in the room, dreaming as he was of the luscious war-horse fillets.

"Let's hear, pretty one, what you read in my hand," said the commander, straightening himself in his uniform, for he always struck attitudes when a woman was by, and besides it amused him to make the humpback jealous.

Régine did not seem to notice his posing; she was attentively tracing the lines of the gay soldier's strong hand. Whether she believed in her own art, or merely skilfully played the chiromancer, her features changed expression in keeping with the progress of her scrutiny. She began with a smile, raising astonished eyes to Podensac's, then her face grew gradually clouded, and she finally let the hand drop all of a sudden, as if she had discovered some fatal sign.

"Well, charming sorceress! what does the book of destiny say?" inquired the Gascon merrily.

She leaned her elbows on the table and shook her head mournfully.

"Come, come, let's have it out by the alphabet!" continued the commander, tapping the ivory discs with his finger.

Régine looked at him fixedly, clearly inquiring if he really meant it. He understood, for he nodded several times, saying:

"Fire away, beauty! I am steady under fire, and you can tell me anything you like."

She commenced rapidly picking and choosing among the letters, whilst Podensac, who knew what he was talking about, could not help exclaiming:

"There's fingers like tapers, and rosy nails really almond-shaped! Lucky dog that you are, Taupier, confound you!"

It was not just then Régine's high-born hand that the humpback was regarding, but the words she was forming upon the board, whilst he anxiously wondered what she was going to reveal. Podensac spelled it all out as the countess formed a line.

"You—one day—will wear—six—gold stripes."

"General! my stars! a general I shall be!" he roared, drawing himself

up and rounding out his chest; "come to that, it's likely, and there's nothing in that to call for a chief-mourner's phiz, little gipsy!"

She continued to form the phrases.

"The deuce! there's a *P.S.*, it seems," resumed the warrior. "Let's have a look at that."

The following line appeared under her fingers: "But your death will be violent."

"Humph! that is less jolly," remarked the future general, "but, bah! let the bullet or shell splinter come in a dozen years—the rank is worth running the risk. But it seems you have not finished yet," he added, watching the prophetess's work. "'Before a year,'—by all that's blue! that's precious short time! not enough to save much out of my pay.—'Unless'—ah! hurry up the saving clause—I shall not be sorry to laugh a little longer. We have got to 'Unless'—"

"This week—you save—someone's—life."

After arranging these last words, Régine stopped and fastened her luminous gaze upon Podensac. The scene was curious at that moment. The citizens of the Rue Maubué, however stout Voltairians, had not always disdained to have their fortunes told by their sweethearts of the Markets, and they followed the phases of the horoscope with marked interest. Though he pretended to be above such weaknesses, the irregulars' officer could not repel the superstitious sentiment felt sometimes by all men accustomed to risk their lives. As for Taupier, he had not yet settled what was the true intent of this witchcraft, and wondered whether Régine was acting some device to escape him, or was simply an idiot. But he began to get uneasy. Happily for him, Mouchabeuf came in, and also read the strange forecast on the table. The two rascals exchanged a glance which implied: "High time to put an end to this foolery."

"Save someone's life!" repeated Podensac. "That suits me, provided it is not a Prussian's."

It stood to reason that the deaf-mute could not hear this remark, and yet Taupier imagined that she shook her head.

"Leave the girl alone," he said, rising abruptly, "she's sweet on her old trade, a thing I do not like, because she gets so queer in the head that she falls ill."

"Hold on, captivating Taupier, let's have one more question and the consultation will be over. Only just time to learn whose life I ought to save."

"Commander," broke in Mouchabeuf, thinking this the meet moment to intervene, "it is time you were off. I have already been hauled over the coals for having housed your men after seven o'clock, and I don't want the gendarmerie to shut up my *ken*."

"Don't let us get hot, mine host—I don't want to sleep here—besides its being a long string of a march back to our camp."

"Where is your position?" inquired the humpback, caring little about the information, but endeavouring to distract Podensac's attention.

"At Petit-Nanterre, at the end of Argentueil Bridge. Just let me see what the witch has laid out, and off's the word."

He spelled again:

"'You must save Lieutenant—'"

The reading was interrupted by an outcry of Mouchabeuf, standing at the threshold. "Rockets and bomb-shells! it's a Prussian patrol!" he shouted all in a fright.

The words were the signal for a general scamper. The Forlorn-Hope ran for their guns, and Podensac drew his sword.

"I don't want any of your butcher's work here," said Mouchabeuf, decisively. "Get away by the garden— Polyte will show you."

"In fact, we are not in force," muttered the captain following his men who had nimbly gained the riverward exit.

Taupier, who had not lost his wits, bent over to see the name the girl was forming, but she shuffled all the counters with a sweep of the hand, rose and placed herself upright in a corner, all attention.

"What's to be done?" queried the humpback.

"Stand your ground. They are Pomeranians whom I know. We risk nothing."

"But the girl, must we show her to them?"

"Faith! I've changed my mind," said Mouchabeuf, gliding up to the wall; "the lass is altogether too knowing and I fall back on desperate play." Whilst speaking he stooped down and pressed the floor-boards. A trap door opened under Régine's feet, and she fell through uttering a loud scream.

XXXIX.

"SHE called out!" said Taupier, frightened, not at Régine's fate, but at the sound and the eventual consequences.

"All deafmutes make that row, and the Prussians are too far off to hear it," observed Mouchabeuf, who guessed what troubled the humpback.

Since the master of the Yellow House had got home, he showed much more coolness than the chief of the abducting party. There were many reasons for this change of character. To begin with, the fiery Taupier, though he freely advocated sorties in overwhelming force, was of Panurge's opinion at bottom, fearing cuffs and blows naturally. The proximity of the enemy had much befogged his clearness of wits. There had been a great deal of slaughter around Rueil and there was a battle-taint in the air which troubled his brain. Mouchabeuf, perhaps no braver, had the immense advantage of being on his own ground. Lastly, the humpback had laid his plan in advance, and through a singular fatality the most unforeseen accidents had successively deranged all his combinations. In itself the wine-shop keeper's brutal expedient had not displeased him, but he did not like improvised sequels and more than ever regretted the canal had not been utilised. After going down, the trap-door had returned into its place of its own impulsion, and Mouchabeuf had merely to fasten the spring which worked it to make the flooring good again. Thanks to this ingenious mechanism and the door leading into the garden, both Régine and the sharpshooters' squad had vanished like lightning, without leaving any traces of their fleeting save the half-drained glasses and some counters forgotten on the table.

"All's well unless that drunken captain does not lose his way," muttered the landlord. "He is very likely to blunder and run into the midst of the Germans."

"All we lack are a few bullets, now," said Taupier, far from encouraged.

"Yes, to say nothing of the rascally Pomeranians taking the attack as an excuse for searching my cellar, whereupon—"

"Would the girl have been killed in falling?" asked the humpback, lowering his voice.

A sharp whistle sounded outside before Mouchabeuf had time to answer the burning question.

"That's Tichdorf asking if the house is clear," he said hurriedly. "And that lubberly Polyte doesn't return!"

The wrongfully accused barman reappeared at the very moment of his master's uttering his name.

"Gone!" he said breathlessly; "I saw them to the bend of the road and told them to steal away quietly."

"Good. Now run and meet the patrol and give the signal that the corporal can come on with his men."

Polyte darted out with an eagerness which did not bear much evidence of his patriotism. But he had no time to go far. The Germans had marched up and their musket butts were already clattering on the yard flags.

"Here they are," said Mouchabeuf, "I shall pass you off as my nephew, Tichdorf is very suspicious and he would be mistrustful of a stranger."

Taupier had a great mind to decline this improvised relationship, but it was too late to offer objections. On the threshold of the door appeared a face ornamented with long yellow moustaches, a flat nose and a greasy forage-cap. This unprepossessing countenance belonged to a Pomeranian soldier who glided into the wineshop with all the wariness common to that prudent race. Another followed, precisely similar to the first, still another and so on till, in less than a minute, twelve of Kaiser Wilhelm's fusileers had invaded the room. These men so closely resembled one another that only an expert eye could tell them apart. The same blackleather bluchers in which the trousers were stuffed, the same grey canvas haversacks, and the same dense and brutal physiognomies. One could believe them all cast in the same mould like the leaden soldiers for their children's playthings. The corporal alone differed from this troop of armed puppets, and he was worth studying. Tall, slender and fair, consequently after the North German type, he boasted a cunning face and a pointed nose which was foiled by his followers' coarse features. His uniform was much neater than theirs, and his regularly combed whiskers attested to his paying attention to his toilet, generally unusual among soldiers in active operations and among the Prussian bivouacs.

"Good-day, old Mouchabeuf and company," said he, in French, without the least foreign accent, "is there any chance of a glass or two of cognac to warm one?"

"Certainly, M. Tichdorf," replied the wineshop-keeper, eagerly; "you know that my cellar is at your disposal."

"Ha! a cellar you have never taken me into, you cunning old scamp," returned the corporal mirthfully, "but provided you haul up two quarts of your ordinary firewater, and a bottle of superior quality for me to drink with you, I shall not bother myself about what goes on in your subterranean apartment."

Taupier listened with stupor to this speech, which a true-blooded Parisian need not have disavowed, and began already to feel vague disquiet. The allusion to the cellar sent a cold shiver down his back, and he shifted from one hot foot to the other to conceal his embarrassment.

"I'll just tell Polyte to select the bottles from the best bin," replied Mouchabeuf, requiring to give his potman private instructions before sending him into the cellar.

Whilst he was talking with him at the doorway, the soldiers took seats on the benches in a half-circle, and facing the entrance, in the spirit of self-preservation never leaving the good soldier, their guns between their legs and the table before them to serve at a pinch as a barricade. Tichdorf sat astride of a separate stool like a chief in front of his troop, and lighted up a huge china pipe.

"It looks as if you had had company to-day, Daddy Mouchabeuf," said he, puffing away a cloud of smoke.

"Yes, this is my nephew come here this morning with the ambulances, and going to sleep here to-night."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the corporal incredulously, "and now I could have sworn that I have met this gentleman at the Bourse or in the Café de Suède."

"At the B-Bourse," repeated Taupier, more and more disconcerted.

"Oh, true, you are no doubt surprised," said Tichdorf, laughing away heartily, "to see a man who knows the Café de Suède, leading a dozen lusty lads who were paddling about the Königsberg fens three months ago. Barbarians, as you call them!"

"Oh, no," stammered the humpback, confounded, "but I must own that—"

"Good gracious! it's simple enough, my dear fellow," continued the affable corporal; "when the war broke out, I was clerk to a money-broker in the Rue de Richelieu, and I intend to go back to my old crib when all this marching and trumpeting is over."

"As to that, I do not see why you shouldn't," said Taupier, to help him along and be friendly.

"In the first place, I am a friend of man and do not like warfare; it is detrimental to the brotherhood of peoples and the prosperity of commerce. Hence I am only fighting because I am compelled to do so, but that does not stay me plying my own private trade. That's so, isn't it, Daddy Mouchabeuf?"

"Nothing surer, M. Tichdorf," answered the landlord—"and your private trade is not a bad one either, ha, ha!"

"Pooh! it swells the bag. Talking of that, do you bring me any newspapers?"

"Only the day before yesterday's. I had no time to buy any last night."

"Then you'll be twenty francs short. You know our agreement; I have a treat for you, the latest number of the 'Times' and the 'Augsburg Gazette.'"

"That's capital!" exclaimed the host; "and if you do not price them too high—"

"They are worth a thousand-franc-note if a sou, but you shall have them for half the price."

"Oh! M. Tichdorf, do be reasonable; wherever do you think I am going to rake up all that money?"

"That's not my look-out. But I am a generous soul. I will pass you the two sheets presently, when my men begin to see double; the day after to-morrow you will bring me a bond on the Crédit Foncier, and you will throw me your papers into the bargain. The funds ought to have fallen to-day since our trouncing you yesterday, and I reckon I'll make a good investment."

"I can't say, M. Tichdorf, but —"

"But me no buts, my old mate. You know that I am blunt in business; it's take it or leave it with me."

Taupier, though not easily astonished, went from one surprise to another. This singular speculator who gave his orders on 'Change between a battle and patrol duty, inspired admiration mingled with apprehension. He reasoned that a head so well constituted as to drive warfare and stock speculations two abreast might become a dangerous adversary or a useful auxiliary. So he set to ruminating on the means of attaching him to his party.

"How about that brandy, Daddy Mouchabeuf; is it coming to-morrow?"

"I can't make out what that dunderhead, Polyte, is up to," muttered the host.

"My savages are thirsty," proceeded the corporal, "and they must be pacified if you do not want them shoving in their oars."

"I'll call him," said the landlord, going to the counter behind which was a winding stairway to the cellar.

Tichdorf spoke briefly to his men in German whilst the Boniface, bending over the rail, shouted himself hoarse to Polyte.

"The lout is capable of sneaking away towards La Malmaison to look after the dead horses," groaned Mouchabeuf.

"Halloa! here's some letter blocks," cried the corporal, spying the alphabetical counters Régine had left on the table. "Have you got children here?"

Taupier was about to make some sort of a reply, when a strange sound caused him to start. It was like someone knocking under the floor.

XL.

ON feeling the repeated knockings under his feet, Taupier had briskly quitted the place where he was standing. Mouchabeuf had remained at the top of the stairs, open-mouthed, and pricking up his ears. The Prussians had risen and were looking round them uneasily, whilst setting their guns at full cock. Their corporal had not budged, however, but on his face suddenly glowed a malevolent curiosity.

"Did you hear that?" he inquired of the humpback, looking him straight in the eyes.

"I—I heard nothing," faltered the latter, though unable to keep from changing colour.

"And you over there, Daddy Mouchabeuf," shouted Tichdorf, "have you got spirit-rappers in your lair?"

"Twas the wind, corporal," said the host, visibly agitated.

"Wind—down in your cellar? That won't wash with me, my old vendor of liquid fire."

"But I am ready to take my Bible oath, M. Tichdorf—"

"Look here!" interrupted the ex-stock-broker's clerk, "you know that I am a good and easy sort of fellow outside of my military duties. There have been Frenchmen here—there's a troop of sharpshooters in the wind that you allude to—and if by any chance you meditate playing a trick on me and my men, you had better say so, because—"

"A trick! What do you mean by a trick?"

"Because I shall have you shot off-hand, both you and this gentleman, who looks as much your nephew as I do Bismarck's son."

"Fie, M. Tichdorf!" reproached Mouchabeuf, "is this how you treat an old friend?"

"My dear fellow, it's best to be on the safe side; and I have no desire to live on biscuit or to enter Paris, as a prisoner of war. That would interrupt my operations on the Stock Exchange."

After uttering these words, which showed his profound knowledge of French, he gave his men an order in their own tongue. There was no need to understand German to guess that he advised them to be on the alert, for the Pomeranians instantly "carried arms." Furthermore, by the way of precaution, two of them went to stand by the entrance, two others took up position at the stair-head, and Tichdorf warily approached the humpback. The latter began to curse the weakness that had brought him into the Yellow House, and cast looks of alarm upon the soldiers, whose bearing was anything but encouraging. The non-production of the brandy had put them out of humour, and they rolled their eyes, and curled their long, tawny moustaches. The more impatient ones toyed with the breeches of their Dreyse guns, and each clink of a nail on the plate made Taupier double up with terror.

"Now, then, Daddy Mouchabeuf," pursued the corporal tranquilly, "let us go properly to work. That noise comes from your cellar, and I cannot suppose that your champagne corks flying out would hit so hard as that."

"It's Polyte, for sure! The clumsy clod has broken something," said the landlord, happy to have found a plausible explanation.

"Another bit of gammon, my dear friend. Were it Polyte, he would have come up after all this time, and your howling for him. *Ergo*, it is time to take me into your famous vault, if only to see if your stock of cognac is ample."

At this direct challenge, the hapless landlord nearly swooned away. Under ordinary circumstances, it would have been a desperate move to allow intrusion into the storehouse of his solid, as well as liquid, treasures; but matters were still worse this evening. The idea of introducing Régine to his friend Tichdorf frightened him even more, as he entertained other projects than heretofore as regarded the girl. When he had taken her under his safeguard at the canal brink, the astute wineshop-keeper believed he was dealing with an almost idiotic person, and he based his hope of complete impunity upon her infirmity. But since he had observed her proceedings with Podensac, he had gone over to Taupier's radical opinions, and only thought of killing their victim. To exhibit her to the corporal, particularly after the violence she had been subjected to, was to expose them to a dangerous denunciation. The ivory letters were still on the table, and the deaf-mute had shown what she could do with them. Not that he believed Tichdorf the man to be squeamish about a crime, but he did not want to place himself on any terms in the confidence of the speculator, as regarded misdeeds which he would use to his profit.

"He will blackmail me," mused Mouchabeuf, "and all my eatables and money will go to stop his mouth."

"Now then, away we go," broke forth the Prussian, "show the way to my men."

The inkeeper stirred no more than a stone statue.

"Shall we have your nephew with us in our underground stroll?" inquired Tichdorf, mockingly.

It was now the humpback's turn to tremble. Since a quarter of an hour he had cut a strange figure. His gorilla-like hands were incessantly straying

over his corrugated forehead to brush away the perspiration oozing out of every pore, and his knock-knees bent under him. He also comprehended that the corporal was an undesirable partner. Yet, to speak to him was even more perilous than to remain silent.

"Well, aren't we going to start?" asked the pitiless Tichdorf.

"But I—I have not got the cellar key," stammered Mouchabeuf.

"Dear me! where is it, please?"

"Polyte took it to go after the brandy, and—"

"And, of course, Polyte has sloped!"

"He went out where the fighting was. Anywhere an animal is killed for a league around, that greedy beggar runs out to it."

"Unless he blundered into the road to Rueil where the scouts were waiting just now for the warning."

"On my faith, that's not true!" exclaimed the wineshop-keeper, sincere for once.

"Daddy Mouchabeuf," said the corporal tranquilly, "you must have a poor opinion of my intellect to believe that I swallow all the 'whackers' you tell me. I warn you that I have had enough, and that I am going away with my men; but your brandy, which we have not had, will cost you dear—"

"As you like, M. Tichdorf," said the host, enchanted to see the Prussians beat a retreat. "But I'll give you my word of honour—"

"Only," pursued the obstinate corporal, making him a sign to be hushed, "I mean to take my measures before I depart. You will admit that when I fancy a glass of old wine, a good cigar, or a newspaper to read in the Yellow House, I ought not to be continually exposed to being captured. Consequently, old friend, you will have to turn over your place to somebody else."

"Turn over—what?" demanded the stupor-stricken Mouchabeuf.

"Your establishment, of course, and all there is in it."

"I don't understand you," muttered the unfortunate landlord.

"Yet it is quite plain. Suppose that you and your nephew die of a rush of blood to the head this evening, and that the authorities at Rueil record your decease in the morning, what ensues, prithee?"

"But we are not ill," protested Mouchabeuf vehemently.

"Maybe not; but we are all mortal. The upshot will be that the aforesaid authorities, not sorry to gather news now and again, will set up another host here with whom I shall come to some agreement, and he will not try any tricks upon me. You see that I have everything to gain by the rush of blood previously mentioned."

"You must be joking, M. Tichdorf," gasped the innkeeper.

"Not at all. As you shall soon see," replied the stern corporal, issuing some order in German to his soldiers, who wanted no repetition of it, to take the two Frenchmen by the collar and shove them against the wall.

"Here, I hope you are not going to shoot us!" yelled Taupier, struggling.

"Really I am," rejoined Tichdorf.

"But it's shameful—I protest," howled the humpback.

"Can't help it! I used to have confidence in your uncle—now I've none, and hence you will grant that—"

"M. Tichdorf, I swear to you, by all that is most sacred," stammered the terrified tavern-keeper, "that there's not a soul in my cellar, and—"

Bang, bang, bang! three forcible knocks shook the planks.

"There, what did I tell you?" cried the corporal. "You see that I have no time to lose. So, gentlemen, get ready to go!"

The two persecutors of Régine, their backs set to the wall, trembled on their legs, unable even to beg for mercy.

"*Gewehr an*—make ready!" said Tichdorf to his fusileers, who executed the order with perfect unanimity.

"Mercy, mercy!" screamed the humpback and tavern-keeper together, "we'll open the cellar to you—"

"Open the cellar?" repeated the fair-haired Mephistopheles with a diabolical grin, "what's the use when there's not a soul there?"

"Never mind about that, we'll show you," replied Mouchabeuf, who had lost his head and did not know what he said.

"Yes, yes! there is! there is a woman there!" shrieked the humpback, hoping in his terror this confession would save him.

XLI.

THE soldiers remained in position, their guns levelled, and one command the more would send the two confederates into the other world. The corporal seemed to enjoy prolonging the anguish of the wretches, as he ran his piercing eye over their pallid faces and the angular ones of the Pomeranians, rendered ferocious by their unquenched thirst.

"A woman," he said, shaking his head, "the *cantinière* of the irregulars, of course?"

"No, I swear to you, M. Tichdorf," faltered the innkeeper supplicatingly, "it is only a young girl, and pretty—"

"That can't be," returned the corporal with an incredulous smile. "How could there be a pretty girl here, and why would you have hidden her away? Daddy Mouchabeuf, this is not nice of you! for you know that I am not averse to the softer sex."

"You will see," replied the hapless tavern-keeper more and more confused by the boulevard lounge's ironical airs.

"No, decidedly, I have no time," said the latter, "and I am very silly to amuse myself chaffing with you when the freeshooters may surround us at any minute."

With this, he turned towards his soldiers. Taupier dropped on his knees, and his companion in misery wrung his hands, crying:

"Pardon! mercy! the cellar is open—I will show you the way, and—"

"Mouchabeuf, my friend, you keep on saying the same thing, and you become a bore."

On a glance from their corporal, the Pomeranians took aim. But instead of ordering them to fire, the other continued in a drawl:

"Besides, old friend, you speak of the cellar being open, and yet you asserted Polyte took away the key—"

"But—"

"No buts for me but butts of wine; I have no desire to run after your man, or await his return; so a truce to chatter, and let's get on with the shooting."

The tavern-keeper uttered a downright howl.

"There, there!" he tried to articulate, extending a trembling arm in the direction of a corner of the room.

"Well, what about there? Has your cellar got a doorway in the wall?"

"No, it's a trap," said Mouchabeuf, with much difficulty, for the words stuck in his throat.

"Bless us and save us!" ejaculated Tichdorf, ready to burst with laughter. "A trap! so your den is supplied with traps like a theatre, eh? well, I was pretty right in being on my guard."

"Open—open quickly," muttered the humpback, nearly fainting away.

"Come, I have a golden heart, you know," said the facetious corporal, "and if it were only out of curiosity, I would like to know the thing from top to bottom—the bottom especially. Whereabouts is this celebrated trap?"

"I'll show it you, but do first send your men away."

"I will. I can see that their guns make you shake a trifle; but, mind, they will not be far, and if you try to spring any traps on me, your punishment will not be long coming."

Whilst pronouncing this scarcely encouraging sentence, Tichdorf signalled his men to "ground arms." The thud of the butt-ends on the floor nearly made the two villains fall flat forward in terror. It produced a more unexpected effect at the same time. The knocking recommenced underneath the boards, as if to play the echo. The corporal gave some orders in German, which the guard executed with that silent precision always distinguishing the Prussian automata. Four ranged themselves round their superior with rifles ready, and the others stood in reserve in the centre of the room to forestall any attempted escape.

"Now, let's see about it; the machinery is in that corner, I suppose?" pursued Tichdorf, pointing to the part whence the noise proceeded.

"Yes, yes, I'm going," sighed the innkeeper, making great efforts to keep erect.

Taupier could not even raise his body on his twisted legs.

"Oh, hang it all, steady yourselves a bit?" jeered the ex-speculator in stocks; "I offer you your life for a pretty woman, a fair exchange, as we used to say in the lobby, and nothing to kick at. Unless, not having 'the stocks,' you cannot 'deliver,' in which case I shall have to 'settle' with you."

These untimely puns had the power of restoring the rogues some self-possession. They felt that they had found their master, and that the safest course was to passively obey. Mouchabeuf tottered a few paces, supporting himself by the wall, then he stooped and pressed the spring. The trap suddenly fell down, and exposed a yawning hole. Tichdorf carefully bent over it, but could see nothing.

"Well, we've got the trap, which is something," he said in the same tone of raillery. "Now where is the woman?"

"Down there," muttered the wineshop-keeper.

"Down there, eh? if you think that I am going after that bait to be caught with my men by your *gin*, ha, ha! you are a bigger fool than I took you for, Mouchabeuf."

"But—"

"Call up the girl, of course! If she be living woman, she will come; for she can't find much sport among the beetles and the mice down there."

"She—she is deaf—"

"Not bad for an excuse, but it won't catch me. I mean to see her, and directly, even though she be dumb into the bargain," uttered the corporal, little dreaming how right he was.

"How can I?" asked the landlord, timidly.

"A plain 'deal,'" rejoined Tichdorf, who was given to this expression common on 'change. "Your nephew will go down into the pithole and fetch up the article, only, as he may try to perform some trick, this is my *ultimatum* : unless he reappears in five minutes, I shall shoot you and burn the house over your heads."

"He'll come back, M. Tichdorf, he'll come back," protested the host, nudging Taupier's elbow to engage him to obey.

Whatever might be the latter's terror of the Dreyse guns, he showed little alacrity about engulfing himself in the obscure profundity of the vault. He was ignorant of the internal arrangement of the basement, and especially dreaded to meet his victim. Whether she were prostrate and wounded by her fall, or standing ready with the club with which the floor had been struck, neither hypothesis offered anything agreeable to her tormentor.

"I d—do—don't know the road," stammered he, "while Mouchabeuf—"

"You can safely jump down : there's a mattress," the tavern-keeper hastened to say, not caring any more himself to go on a voyage of discovery in the underground regions.

"Come, come, dear sir, carry out the contract," said the corporal. "You cannot injure yourself, for your uncle assures you there's a bed below."

"And a ladder to come up by," added Mouchabeuf.

The unfortunate humpback made the strangest spectacle between the abyss yawning at his feet and the bayonets pricking him behind. He was, nevertheless, going to take the leap and, bending over the gap, was assuming the attitude of Curtius diving into the chasm, when the least expected of apparitions made him draw back, briskly. Out of the shade filling the hollow, gradually emerged Régine's charming head.

"Ah ! ah !" burst out the corporal, "it was the truth, then."

Indeed Mouchabeuf, extraordinary as it was, had not told a lie for upwards of an hour, and what he told Taupier about the mattress and ladder was perfectly correct. The trap served a double purpose. In case of alarm, the landlord could jump down through it without risk : he would only fall on the padded ground and could send the door up again by touching a counter-spring ; he then could remain there till the danger went by, or go out into the garden by a side exit. If, on the other hand, it was intended to get rid of an enemy or mere interloper, the trap was worked similarly, but the mattress was removed beforehand, so as to render the fall very dangerous. As this latter case was the rarer, the buffer was almost always there and, on this evening notably, the tavern-keeper had had neither the time nor the thought to withdraw it. Preserved by this happy forgetfulness, the girl was slowly mounting a stepladder which she had blundered across and utilised.

At the end of the ill-lighted room, this figure, rising as by a secret spring, wore a fantastic aspect. The Pomeranians, though not naturally impressionable, recoiled surprised and almost appalled. Mouchabeuf and Taupier stared at each other with poorly dissembled anxiety. Tichdorf, though, seemed not a jot affected. He offered his hand for Régine to leap upon the floor with the same ease as if he had asked her to waltz.

"I see with pleasure, dear lady, that your seclusion in that rat-hole has not dimmed your beauty," he said in a tone of gentle gallantry.

"She cannot hear or speak," the landlord hastened to say.

The girl drew the corporal towards the table.

"The letters—I've forgot the letters !" muttered Mouchabeuf in terror.

Régine had sat down and the engraved ivory counters were already gliding about under her fine fingers.

"She's writing!" cried Tichdorf. "By jove, this is getting curious!"

"What can she be going to say?" thought the brace of ruffians.

"Hallo! it's German!" said the corporal, watching the letters arranged by the fortune-teller.

Mouchabeuf and his partner looked at one another disappointed. Neither understood the language of Goethe and Schiller, and their deception gave their chop-fallen faces the most comical of expressions.

XLII.

THE scene which had been enacted in Podensac's presence was renewed, with this difference that the two scoundrels could understand nothing of it. Tichdorf proceeded to spell out the words:

"Wollen—sie—mich nach Saint-Germain—führen."

"Halloa! to Saint-Germain?" repeated the corporal, "what a queer idea?" He added in German: "*Ja wohl.*"

"She can't hear you," said Mouchabeuf.

But the nod accompanying the reply had sufficed for the girl's comprehending that her request was accepted. What was her request? Taupier and his confederate burned to know, yet were not to know, that it was "to take her to Saint-Germain," for they durst not question the Prussian for fear of appearing too inquisitive and rousing suspicion. A French word, the only one in Régine's sentence, had vividly struck them, the humpback in particular. The name of Saint-Germain thus mentioned, awoke more than one memory in Valnoir's friend. The girl's face lighted up on seeing Tichdorf disposed to do what she asked. She continued manipulating the discs anew till the following words were put together:

"Ich dank. Lasst uns gehen." (Thanks. Let us start.)

Scarcely had she finished than she rose, her attitude revealing gratitude and a desire to leave at once. The corporal motioned her to be seated again, and muttered in French: "Presently."

"It's clear that she begged to be taken hence," reasoned Taupier.

An interrogation impended. Tichdorf's small but brilliant eyes wandered over the Frenchmen's countenances, and they could not hope he would go away without explanations. Mouchabeuf had his tale ready, and the humpback's was not behind-hand. The difficulty was to agree before speaking, and the pair found themselves in the dilemma of prisoners brought before a magistrate without having had time to concert anything. If the corporal questioned them separately and alone, they were strongly exposed to hang themselves in their own fabrications. But the long room lent itself badly to private examinations, for it was not probable that Tichdorf would make a corner of it his confessional-box. His mood ought to be to question them quickly and have done with an unsettled situation. This was indeed what happened.

"Who is this girl?" he curtly demanded.

"Well, Monsieur Tichdorf, I was just going to tell you," said Mouchabeuf, hunting for words, "it is—a—a relation of my nephew's."

"What is she doing here, and why did you hide her in the cellar?"

"That's nothing odd! you can see how that was. She is very pretty, and as this is an inn where all sorts of people come—that's no reflection on

you or your men that I'm making, Monsieur Tichdorf—but these irregular skirmishers have respect for nothing and nobody, and—”

“Good ; but this does not explain why you brought her out here. On the day after a battle, a good-looking young woman does not come promenading for her pleasure by the outposts.”

The tavern-keeper gave Taupier a glance by way of asking his attention.

“I am sorry I am obliged to do it,” he said, assuming the mien of one forced to make a painful avowal. “I have confidence in you, and I shall make a clean breast of it.”

“Do so quickly, I am in a hurry.”

“Well, here you have it. This girl comes of a good stock, akin to my nephew, as I have already stated, but she went wrong.”

“You don't say so ! a deaf mute ! you surprise me,” said Tichdorf, ironically.

“Oh, she is as artful as a monkey, and you have seen that she can make herself understood for all that. I will go on to tell you that she has caused her parents much sorrow. Old Nick himself cannot hold these young vixens. Would you believe it that she ran away from a kind home to scamper from fair to fair with a mountebank ?”

“This is curious, indeed,” acceded the corporal, still incredulous.

“As true as I live ! a bully who taught her tricks and to tell fortunes. You will readily understand that her family were not proud of this, and when they did lay hold of her again, they sent her to me to bring her to reason—”

“Very well. And you put her in the cellar to correct her ?”

“Just so,” cried Mouchabeuf ; “but I never intended to leave her long there. Oh, goodness, gracious saints to save us ! no, no, poor child ! every sin has its corresponding mercy. I have a room for her upstairs, and in a fortnight, when my nephew and I have given her a good talking to, we shall send her home to her father, though, to speak frankly—”

“What ?” queried Tichdorf, eyeing the speaker fixedly.

“Though I do not much hope to convert her. The mountebank whom she's ‘gone upon’ is in Paris, and he's the man to come dangling round here. If her folks would listen to me, they would do with her as they do with a badly-behaved youngster—pack him off to sea.”

“Sea voyages are not so easily undertaken just now,” observed the Prussian.

“That's true enough, and we shall have to keep her as long as the siege lasts. By heaven ! who ever would get us clear of her would do us a great service !”

Whilst the rogue was pouring out his lies in a bland tone, Régine had rested her elbows on the table and was playing absently with the useful counters. Beside her, her fate was in the balance without her trying to learn on the lips of her disposers whether it was to be liberty or death. On the contrary, Taupier listened with all his ears to the pretty fiction spun by his accomplice. The opening had much pleased him, but the conclusion spoiled all. This direct invitation of a Prussian abduction of the girl was a colossal blunder in his eyes, for the humpback, being keener-witted than his satellite, began to divine the truth. He would have given a great deal to take the romancer apart and scold him soundly, but it was too late to check him on the incline.

“Threefold ass that I was,” he mumbled, “why did I not send them both over into the canal ?”

"So the family would like to be rid of her?" inquired the corporal, like one struck by an idea.

"Be rid—well, have her at a distance," said the landlord, wishing to have his proposition precisely put.

"Is the family wealthy?"

"Well, in easy circumstances," replied Mouchabeuf, somewhat perplexed.

"Very well. Then this is a bargain. Give me two rolls of a thousand francs—in gold, it is understood, of course—in return for which I will hand you the two newspapers and take away the girl."

"Two thousand francs! I have not such a sum here, M. Tichdorf, and I cannot get it till I see her parents."

"Nonsense, you old joker! Parents? is not your nephew near enough kin? I am sure that he has his pouch full of napoleons, and that he will not look at a few gold pieces when he can profit by so fine a chance."

As he spoke, he turned towards Taupier, whose reply was a frightful face. The miserable humpback stood in the most deplorable of all scrapes. Sure now that his associate had gone the wrong way to work, he had not even the resource of contradicting him, for he could not deny his story without gravely compromising himself. On the other hand, to pay for sending Régine precisely where he felt she wanted to go, was a prospect that rent his very soul. He endeavoured to get out of the torment by tergiversation.

"I have n—no such sum about m—me," hesitated, but with a gesture which could not fail betraying him, for his handpocket voluntarily covered his fob as though to defend the treasure bulging at the waistcoat in high relief. For our humpback, as miserly as Valentin was prodigal, and much more distrustful, always carried his handsome facings about with him in these war times.

"Do you really think so," sneered Tichdorf: "just look in your pocket and I am sure you will find the trifle I ask for."

"But no—I assure you," faltered Taupier, choking with rage.

"Would you like a couple of my men to help you inspect your fob?" returned the corporal, with a fiendish grin.

At this suggestion, the humpback leaped as though he had trodden on a serpent. The hair of his head stood on end at the idea of feeling the rough Pomeranian hands paw about in the pockets where all his property was hidden. He saw that he had better yield.

"Indeed, I believe I can—I—I forgot that this very morning—I was paid some cash, and—"

"I knew right well, dear sir, that we should come to an understanding," said Tichdorf, putting out his hand to receive payment.

With desperate contortions, the wretch extracted from their concealment two rolls of gold, and handed them to the terrible corporal, uttering a sigh much resembling a moan.

"Correct!" chuckled the Prussian, "give and take: here are the newspapers. You can draw on your uncle for the five hundred francs. Now, I will remove the young person, and I answer for it that her family will not hear of her for a good while."

Régine was ready. Tichdorf gave an order to his soldiers, who surrounded her, and he then marched out at the head of the procession. The two rascals looked at each other ruefully.

"That costs you rather dear," observed Mouchabeuf, when he believed

the corporal far enough off; "but, at least, we have got rid of the creature."

"Imbecile!" screamed the infuriated humpback, "you have done just what she wished, and sent her to Saint-Germain to join the very man who can destroy the whole of us."

XLIII.

SNOW covered the roofs, and the icy north wind whirled the yellow linden leaves over the wall in the Rue de Laval. A man marched up and down the pavement before the door through which Taupier's gang had passed six weeks before on the night of Régine's abduction. Wearing a pyramidal fatigue-cap and muffled up in a greenish overcoat, the skirts of which allowed the hem of a blue apron to show, this quaint character realised the type, so plentiful towards the close of the siege, of the volunteer National Guard. By his gold spectacles and his white cravat, a resident of that ward would have immediately recognized him as Citizen Bourignard, door-keeper of a house in the Rue de Navarin, and forager of a sedentary company. For the time being, the street was utterly deserted.

Nine o'clock had struck, and the morning *queues* were still detained at the doors of the butchers and provision-dealers of the neighbourhood. Everybody was awaiting his turn, provided with the card delivered by the municipal administration to each household. Nevertheless, the majestic doorkeeper was not alone. Around him hovered a boy in a sailor's dress, who appeared to have been dragged through the gutter, he was so thoroughly muddled. His pale weasel-face disappeared three parts under an immense glazed hat, pulled down over his eyes, so that nothing was to be seen but his tongue, put out at his father, but speedily drawn in when he turned. This ironical grimace was the more blamable as the naughty boy addressed it to the author of his days, this amateur sailor being no other than young Agricola, minor son of the virtuous Bourignard, door-keeper by profession and a radical by vocation. In honour of the legendary Gringalet, the gunner from the fleet who dismounted all the Prussian siege guns at the first fire, his father had bought him a serge suit whereon the patriotic hand of Citizeness Bourignard had profusely embroidered golden anchors, those attributes of the navy. But this brilliant outfit had, in no way, changed the habits of Agricola, who continued to run counter to all the fair hopes of his progenitors by playing truant to go and pitch coppers on all the bastions of the sector.

Bourignard freely acknowledged, in discoursing about his heir presumptive, that he had the instincts of the wild colt, and he reared him after the theories of the "Emile" of Jean Jacques Rousseau, his favourite author. The result was that the hopeful passed in the Mutual Schools for a dunce and throughout the ward as a very wicked blackguard. Rarely did this child of nature consent to go out with his father; but on this day the latter, no doubt, had important reasons for dragging his unconquerable offspring at his heels. He had propped himself straight up against the wall which concealed the pavilion from the view of passers-by, and was wiping his glasses with feverish activity.

"It is really peculiar," he commented to himself, "this enclosure presents no other issue than a door without knob or lock. I do not see how I can acquit myself of Citizen Taupier's commission."

This monologue was interrupted by the shrill voice of the urchin who set up howling, to split one's ears, the then popular song in the scarcely literary region of Belleville.

"Bismarck, if you keep on, you soon will learn
Of all your Prussian swarm, none will return!"

"Enough!" said Bourignard with a noble gesture; "the song is patriotic but unsuitable at the present moment."

"What, what! unsuitable!" yelled the youngster with the drawling tone of the workmen of the town.

"Yes, my son, unsuitable inasmuch as I am invested with a confidential mission and I do not wish to arouse the attention of the aristocracy who inhabit yon domicile."

"Of all your Prussian swarm, none will return!" continued the irreverent Agricola in a still higher key.

"I ought to insinuate myself by stratagem," continued the grandiloquent doorkeeper, "and I brought you along to assist me in this difficult undertaking. I hope Agricola, that you will justify my expectation."

"Your expectation! that will do me a lot of good! I would rather have a ten-sou piece."

"So you shall, if you invent a method of getting the entrance open of this feudal retreat."

"Whatever is a feudal retreat?" queried the amiable child, working the treadmill imaginatively off and on the kerb and upon a heap of mud in the kennel.

"It's the habitation of the supporters of tyranny, my boy."

"I don't tumble to it," replied the boy.

"This wall which you behold, screens reactionary intrigues," continued Bourignard, imperturbably; "to say nothing of it occupying space much employed in constructing lodging-houses for landlords."

"And rooms for the doorkeeper, eh, dad?"

"As for the garden behind, it would sustain twenty families, if edible vegetables were planted in it."

"That's not the game," said Agricola, never hesitating to interrupt the humanitarian theories of his respectable papa. "The game is to make those ten sous."

"I want to speak with an individual of the masculine gender so vile as to serve the two female aristocrats lurking in this pavilion, which reminds the historically-read of the Parc aux Cerfs."

"Oh, the flunkey! an old chap in a green coat—that's an old tale! I snowballed him t'other day as he came out of the grocer's."

"Exactly."

"Well, there's no hocus pocus wanted to get him out. Why don't you ring at the door?"

"You are young, my son, and you do not know the artfulness of the high-born," responded Bourignard, gravely. "To begin with, there is no bell-knob, and, moreover, if one were to hammer away, nobody would open. These are conspirators, and none can be admitted without the signal."

"Is that all?" queried the imp. "You wait a bit—I'll give 'em all the signal they'll want."

Picking up a stone from the roadway, the dreadful scamp flung it over the wall with so much strength and skill that it was heard rattling on the pavilion roof.

‘Stand beside the door, papa, you’ll soon see the effect.’

‘What wit he has, the monster!’ chuckled Bourignard, executing the movement suggested by his inventive heir.

Nobody stirred within, but Agricola was tenacious and sent three or four more projectiles, so as to describe the same parabole and fall on the house. A regular artilleryman could not have done better. The few wayfarers were running along the street to warm themselves, and did not stop to examine the scapegrace’s operations; he taking care, by the way, to place himself out of sight of the two or three still open shops. After a few minutes of this bombardment, Agricola felt unspeakable gratification at seeing the door open softly. A grizzled bearded head showed itself in the narrow aperture, and protruded farther to look around without. It was the juncture Bourignard junior awaited. A final pebble cunningly cast hit the imprudent looker-out in the legs, and the playful youth scampered towards the Rue des Martyrs.

‘You little rascal! you blackguard!’ shouted the injured man, rushing away on his track.

Landreau, for it was he whom Agricola’s device had lured out of his shell, had not paused to consider. It would assuredly have been better to go in again, but the stone had smartly struck his knee, and the gamekeeper, naturally testy, could not resist the temptation to correct the little demon who ventured to assail him thus. So he sprang out into the street, pulling the door to behind him, without noticing Bourignard glued to the wall, and commenced the pursuit with as much warmth as he would have given to a poacher hunt in the Saint-Senier woods. But Agricola had nimble legs.

When Landreau emerged from the Rue de Laval, the rogue was already at the corner of the Avenue Trudaine, where he whisked away round the corner house. The old keeper, having had time to cool a bit, deemed it wise to renounce the enterprise, and stopped out of breath in the middle of the Rue des Martyrs. He had darted forth bareheaded, and in his everlasting green shooting-jacket, which ill conformed with his garde mobile regulation continuations. This was more than enough to attract the attention of the idlers. Besides, a man running is always suspicious, and Landreau’s unusual gait was immediately remarked by the gossips forming a line before the butcher’s.

‘Look at the old man racing for his life.’

‘It’s a thief!’

‘Stop him!’

These outcries rose all at once, and an agitation of civil augury made the string of people undulate like a snake. Warned of his imprudence, the gamekeeper hastened to retreat towards the Rue de Laval, but it was too late. Two of the national guards, charged to keep order at the shop front, left the group, and cut off his retreat. Landreau thought that he would increase the clamour of the mob if he ran, and he had potent reasons not to bring soldiers towards the pavilion. So he tranquilly waited by the kerb for the militiamen to waddle up to him.

‘Where are you running to so fast, citizen?’ demanded a fat guardsman, seemingly in bad humour.

The question was repeated by another over-eager soldier, as thin as his comrade was otherwise, and a ring clustered round them from the passers-by uniting themselves to the public posse. Landreau was puzzling his brain for an answer, when a short, deformed man wriggled through the

circle, and, by dint of elbowing, succeeded in placing himself in the front row.

"What's the matter here?" he inquired in a harsh voice.

"Oh, is this you, Citizen Taupier?" queried the obese guard. "Faith, I hardly know myself as yet. This fellow was tearing along, and he must have reasons for doing so."

"Rather! I should think so," said our humpback, "he's a deserter. See his *moblot* trousers."

XLIV.

"Ен? that's true!" shouted the throng and the national guards in chorus.

"I a deserter? never," said Landreau, energetically.

"Why are you wearing soldier's clothes, then?" sneered Taupier.

"What's that to you, you humpback?" returned the gamekeeper, not disposed to be patient after Agricola's emulation of David.

"Citizens, I take you all as witnesses," screamed the abortion. "This individual refuses to clear himself—consequently, he is in fault."

"By what right do you question me? I don't know you, and I have no longing to know you."

"Possibly. But I speak in the name of the people, who have the right to know everything," said the newspaper man, in the emphatic tone ordinarily reserved by him for harangues at the political clubs.

"Ay, ay, he must answer," roared the great unwashed.

"People do not race about like that unless they have been up to mischief," pertly observed an old hag, laden with a gigantic marketing basket.

"I'll lay he's a pig-headed Breton," said a citizen, in a greasy cap and side-locks flattened on his temples.

"That's not true—I'm a Burgundian," exclaimed Landreau, impelled by local patriotism.

"It's all the same," answered a boy, who had no respect for geography.

"Anyway, it makes no difference," resumed the wearer of the side-locks, "those country *moblots* are all aristocrats."

"Out with it, yes or no. Do you belong to the garde mobile?" questioned a bystander, more sensible than the rest.

"I am past the age," responded the keeper, evasively.

"Then, you have no right to wear the regulation uniform. Illegally wearing a military dress is an offence," pronounced the thin national guardsman, who had come out of some law office.

"Citizens, this man is suspicious at the least," gravely uttered Taupier.

"Suspicious in the first degree," supported the living skeleton of the stay-at-home legion.

"And must be arrested," added the Leg.

"Certainly. Put him in prison. Run him in!"

This clamour rose from all the ranks of the rapidly swollen gathering, now filling the width of the street and stopping new-comers from both ways to augment it. The latter said nothing, and only roared from the spirit of imitation; but in the centre of the ring the rest became more and more hostile.

"To prison? What for?" queried Landreau, forcing himself to keep calm.

"To teach you to 'kick over the traces,' you treacherous *moblot*," answered the flat-capped patriot.

"Isn't it enough to make a body sick to see these slugs creeping about the streets while my man, a sergeant in the 61st, is slave-driven every day into mounting guard on the bastion," groaned the harridan with the basket.

In mobs, as well as in deliberating assemblages, there is always a moderate element, and in this congress of the Rue des Martyrs, the conservative party was represented by a grocer wearing an otterskin cap.

"After all, the poor old chap may not belong to the army, and may have had the breeches given him," said this reservoir of good intentions. "Rather than drag him to the guard-house, better to take him home to see if anyone will recognize him."

"No, no, he can best explain matters to the officer on guard," persisted Taupier whom this conciliatory proposal did not at all suit.

"But still, if he does not dwell a great way off, that would give us the least trouble," observed the stout guardsman. "Where do you live, citizen?"

Landreau was opening his mouth to give the answer, when the idea of leading this threatening mob up to the pavilion checked the words on his lips. He turned red, stammered, and finally uttered this imprudent speech:

"That does not concern you, and I do not care to tell you."

"You hear that, citizen?" shouted the triumphant humpback, "he refuses to tell us."

"Rather! he's got good reasons for that," said the old woman.

There was more than one opinion expressed in the swarm: the first ranks declared it was a thief; farther on it was stated that an escaped galley-slave had been caught, and the last comers affirmed it was an accomplice of the wholesale murderer Troppmann.

"Away with him!" yelled the boys at the top of their trebles.

The two national guards representing the bellicose service amid the tumult could no longer hesitate under the so noisily expressed will of the sovereign people. They consulted one another with a glance, and the fatter of the twain pressed hard on the gamekeeper, whilst his thin comrade tried persuasion.

"Come along, citizen," he said in an insinuating voice, "better to march than be dragged."

At the contact of the above mentioned guard, Landreau started back, and his fists clenched. His face so plainly expressed the resolve to resist, that a void was immediately left around him. The mass waved like a sea, but the farthest, who knew they were out of the reach of blows, responded to the outward movement with a vigorous shove, and the circle was forced in tighter than ever. Alarmed, the national guards essayed to bring down their bayonets to bear. This hasty movement finished the exasperation of Landreau, who fell into position on his legs like an English boxer.

"Just you try to touch me, you 'rampart snails!'" said he in a deep voice.

This epithet, far from flattering to the stay-at-home warriors, raised the spectators' indignation to scorching heat. Landreau had picked it up in the bivouac of the *gardes mobiles*, feeble admirers of the citizen-soldiers, and he was to learn to his cost what it is to fail in respect to such defenders. The fat guardsman laid his hand on his collar, and the thin one dealt him

underhandedly a punch with his musket butt. But the old hunter was quick and strong. With two back-handed blows he freed himself of both adversaries, followed them up and snatched away like lightning one of the sword bayonets, with which he fell on guard. This warlike attitude produced a fine effect of terror, and the group opened with a promptitude which proved once more the prodigious "giving" qualities of mobs. A second earlier and a child could not have found a place, and now the pointed steel had suddenly opened passage sufficient for the proverbial coach-and-six. Landreau lost no time, but rushed at full speed up this unlooked-for outlet.

"Death to the assassin!"

This shout burst forth with formidable unison, and the boldest sprang away in the fugitive pursuit. He had taken heed not to run towards home, and, instead of returning to the Rue de Laval, made for the Avenue Trudaine. The first moment of surprise had given him a dozen paces' start, and he hoped to shake off his pursuers if he got into one of the byways descending from this outer boulevard. But he had reckoned without Agricola. This dreadful little gnome, attracted by the riot made around Landreau, had retraced his steps to see the latter like a toad-in-a-hole amid the hostile gathering. He had not deemed it prudent to get mixed up in it, in this point imitating his respectable father, who had peacefully resumed his way to the Rue de Navarin, but he had ambushed himself at the avenue corner to enjoy the row. When he saw the old keeper take his course in that direction, he naturally thought to do him some harm, and unluckily was given the opportunity. Just as the poor fellow turned the corner house, he was tripped up by the boy and fell flat. He was given no time to recover himself. Before he could scramble up twenty strong arms held him, and he was buffeted, disarmed, and finally carried away like a mere bundle. To resist was useless, and Landreau did not even attempt it. Too crippled to run, Taupier came to join the group as quickly as his defective frame allowed, and took command on his personal authority.

"Citizens," he said solemnly, "this man is evidently a great criminal and belongs to the justice of the people."

"Yes, yes! into the water with him. Bring a rope!" yelled all the generous loafers who had arrested the man, ten to one.

The ire of mobs is ferocious. Hardly were the first cries for death uttered than the thirst for blood overswept all these wretches. Landreau would have been cut to pieces on the spot if they had been armed. But the bayonets of the two guardsmen did not suffice to evince their rage. Everyone wanted his share of the victim, so they were forced to seek another mode. Happily the river was far off, and it was little likely the prisoner could be dragged there without being delivered on the way. It was the model citizen Bourignard's pattern child who undertook to remove the difficulty.

"This way, citizens, this way," he shouted. "I know a good place to string up the aristocrat."

In the middle of the avenue, on the site of the Old Slaughterhouse, rose the Rollin College, then in course of construction. Beams, ropes, pulleys, nothing was lacking on the scaffolding for an execution to be carried out.

Landreau was literally carried thither by the crowd, with the odious youth skipping along at the head of the sinister train.

XLV.

IN calmer times, a summary execution in broad day, and in the heart of Paris, would have certainly been impossible. But political or military crises reacted on minds, and the population during the siege became immeasurably nervous. The result of this unwholesome over-excitement was a complete shifting of habits and radical change of temper. The honest townsman who, before the war, had the word "legality" incessantly on his lips, spoke of nothing but seizing people and shooting them off-hand. Women above all suffered the influence of privations and the anguish to which the blockade doomed them, and mothers of families became transformed into furies after three or four hours' waiting in the mud at a tradesman's door. Hence the throng which hauled the unfortunate Landreau about was mainly composed of men usually peaceable enough. The feminine element dominated, and the housewives had unanimously deserted the *queue* so as not to miss the hideous spectacle offered them through Taupier's spitefulness. Yet it is quite probable that these same creatures, had they found the gamekeeper dying of hunger on a doorstep, would have deprived themselves, to comfort him, of their ration so painfully waited for in the snow. But words have the power of those philters which of old used to suddenly madden. It sufficed to call a man a spy or traitor to consign him to the blind fury of the mob, and the humpback, who understood Demos, took care not to forget the recipe employed in massacres of all periods. He had long meditated on suppressing Landreau, and had prepared the plot with too much care and cunning not to hasten to finish with the burdensome old servingman.

"Make haste, citizens," he screamed, brandishing his cane like a sword. "Let us make haste ere the reactionaries come to hinder the justice of the people."

The procession had crossed the Avenue Trudaine, and his exhortations were quite superfluous, for the reaction was elsewhere occupied—in other words, orderly folk were mounting guard on the walls, or working at home. The public thoroughfares were given over almost exclusively, therefore, to that portion of the population preferring lounging about to the exercise of civic duties, in the quest of evil to perpetrate. These idlers and women were the ready-made auxiliaries for the horrid humpback, and there was no need to worry about the police. The municipal watchfulness was then represented by officers whose dress and habits earned them the title of "our pensive pedestrian friars." These carefully shaven and placid functionaries, clad in long coats with hoods, slowly paced the pavement in knots of two or three, and showed their glum faces now and again at the cross-ways, but never did the idea seize them to intervene in a riot. It has since been conjectured that they were instituted to restore calmness to all minds by the example of their public meditations; but it was surely not to repress disorder, for, towards the end of the siege, they stoically looked on at the pillage of the markets without even offering to stay a hand. A pair of these useful guardians of public tranquillity, stationed at the other end of the avenue, could see the gathering bustling about. But they, no doubt, thought it a patriotic manifestation for they never budged. It must be stated that they had comfortably ensconced themselves in a deep gateway, and that snow was falling thickly.

Guided by Agricola, capering and clucking with delight, the crowd surged into the future college building. The main entrance gave access to a vast hall on the ground floor, which the architect had probably planned for a refectory. Only the four walls were up so far, but some of the beams were laid across for the next flooring. The place favoured the performance of the crime; Taupier had preached to the popular whirlwind, and justice could be done at their ease. Yet the hanging facilities were not as forthcoming as desirable. Ropes were lacking, and the beams were out of the volunteer executioner's reach. The victim, standing on his feet and held by the lustier ruffians, formed the centre of a compact group; whilst Taupier wandered round it in search of the instruments for his design, beginning to fear that the means adopted in principle were not practicable. Besides, there were already some objectors. Their voices rose to ask a modification of the programme in favour of the river or canal, a double alternative which did not suit the execrable humpback, who knew quite well that deferred passions never resume their sway. He also wished strongly to have the execution go off thus in semi-privacy, far from profane eyes, so that he could slip away immediately after. So the delay due to the absence of indispensable implements enraged him, and he cursed the urchin, who had been so stupid as to lead them wrongly into a place destitute of resources. He looked for him to rate him for his blunder, and ask particulars of the plan of this abandoned building. But Agricola had suddenly vanished.

The partisans of drowning were loudly formulating their intentions.

"Let's have him out of this—it's not a good place for settling a turn-coat."

"Let's go to the Austerlitz Bridge."

"No, no, that's too far."

All these commingled cries rose together.

"On to the Basin of La Villette!" growled the hag with the basket.

This last suggestion found favour among the majority.

"Yes, yes, they are the right sort up that way!"

"To the Basin!"

"Come along by the outer boulevard."

The name of the canal where he had wanted to throw Régine in grated on Taupier's ears, his recollection of that enterprise being an unpleasant one. He was seeking another project in his brain, so fertile in rascally inventions, when an unexpected auxiliary came to help him from the plight.

"Below there, ahoy!" squeaked a shrill voice overhead.

All heads were lifted and the urchin's frail body was seen perched on a window ledge twenty feet aloft. Bourignard's worthy heir had nimbly made the outside circuit of the structure, and by climbing up a ladder he had reached the wooden frame corresponding with the first-floor openings. There the masons had left troughs, trowels even, and ropes among which Agricola had only to make a choice. He triumphantly dangled a long and strong rope over the astonished beholders.

"It's that brat!"

"Isn't he an artful young frog!"

"He's got a string—we shall not be done out of our fun."

Flattered by this acclamation, the youngster bowed like an actor on the stage and called out: "All ready to begin!"

Peals of laughter greeted this pleasant sally, and Taupier breathed again to see that his prey would no more escape him.

"Citizens, you are going to see Blondin the hero of the tight rope," yelled the horrible little fiend as he strutted along a joist.

By balancing himself with outstretched arms, he managed in his monkey skill to reach the centre of the hall, where he sat down astride, pulled the rope from under his waistbelt where he had carried it and let the ends slide down, one each side of the beam.

"Now, then, citizens, the performance will begin whenever you say the word," said the young monster.

The group of savages around Landreau began to stir. There was no backing out possible now that the rope was at hand; all that remained to be done was to make a slip knot and noose, place the latter round the victim's neck and haul away on the other end, so as to raise him and send him into eternity. The less inhuman of these wretches of both sexes shrank away, whilst the others worked at the preparations. During all this suspense, the gamekeeper kept cool; he was very pale, it is true, but he carried his head erect, and had not uttered one word since his fall had put him at the mercy of the stupid and ferocious gang. He had often enough looked death in the face not to fear it, and the idea never came to him to try to justify himself at the risk of injuring the ladies of the pavilion. Besides, it was too late; any attempt to soften these brutes would have been useless. Landreau lifted his soul to heaven and prepared to die. All the shameful preliminaries were finished. Four amateur hangmen had grasped the loose rope and the loop dangled a few feet off the ground.

"Look sharp!" yelled the viper from the beam overhead.

The victim was pushed under the improvised gibbet, and a varlet with side curls undertook to fit him with the fatal collar. Taupier watched the proceeding with a dry eye, though several females, seized by a tardy qualm of sensitiveness, made for the door. The two national guards had long since departed; though, as vindictive as stupid, they might willingly arrest people, they did not like to see death.

"Pull-ahoy!" cried the door-keeper's son.

XLVI.

AGRICOLA'S call was obeyed. The villains who held the other end of the rope stiffened themselves on their legs and raised their hands for a higher grasp, so as to begin with a jerk. In a second more, the sufferer would be suspended. Taupier, awaiting this moment with impatience, saw with great uneasiness the fear-stricken women, who had run out, return hurriedly.

"Here come the mobiles! save yourselves!" screamed they, as they dived into the body of the building.

"Quick, quick! run the rascal up or he will escape us!" vociferated the humpback.

But the murderers, less interested than he in removing the gamekeeper, and, moreover, most cowardly by nature, thought it as well to take time to reflect. The mere announcement of the presence of an armed force in the neighbourhood sufficed to render them careful of their actions and their skin, and even the most cruel let go the rope. Landreau remained with the noose tightened on his neck, but no one was by him, and as he had his hands free, nothing prevented him throwing it off. His eyes turned to the door by which deliverance should come, but nobody appeared. Yet the harridans had not spoken falsely. As chance willed it, at the very instant

of their showing their blanched faces out of doors, a detachment of soldiers marched up the Avenue Trudaine. They were Finisterre mobiles returning from the trenches to join their regimental battalion, housed in wooden buildings on the Boulevard de Clichy. The snow continued falling, the cold was sharp, and the poor Bretons, worn out by a night on grand guard, trudged along with drooping heads, with the indifference of countrymen insensible to the beauties of the capital. Landreau might have been hanged within the massive college walls, without any idea coming to them of turning out of their road to see what was going on in the huge edifice of which they had never inquired even the name. But Providence does not stint its measures to save the life of a just man, and the hags who had so greatly contributed to the gamekeeper's arrest were the involuntary cause of his safety. They had rushed into the street, gesticulating and expressing their emotion with the demonstrative loquacity peculiar to their kind.

"They'll kill him!"

"He's strung up already."

"I can hear his death rattle!"

These ominous phrases were blended with screams of terror and interjections of the fish market. This tumultuous out-rush could not miss attracting the attention of the sergeant conducting the platoon, and, at a chance, he commanded a halt. It did not require more to throw disorder into the feminine group. Some ran back bewildered into the hall whilst the better-advised remainder scattered at a run over the street. Though the Finisterre soldiers were not city-bred, they could not be blind to the fact that something serious was going on inside the unfinished building. Besides, the commanding officer was a youth brought up in the towns, and consequently much more sharp than the lads of the Léonais placed under his orders. He spoke a few words in Bas-Breton, and marched to the college at the head of his little troop. The return of the women had brought discomfiture into the hall where Landreau was awaiting death; but the appearance of the soldiery caused a downright scamper. The nimblest of the roughs hastened to clamber up into the windows and jump down inside to scatter beyond the inner courts upon waste land where it was not possible to follow them. Others huddled up in all the crannies and only Taupier stood firm.

As for the door-keeper's love of a son, as soon as he descried the uniforms from the height of his beam, he very intelligently concluded that the time was come to make his exit. Crawling along his perch like a polecat or other highly scented and carnivorous animal, he quickly attained the hole by which he had introduced himself.

"I'm going to shrink into my shell! Good luck, M. Taupier!" he called out, before sliding through the scaffolding.

The hall presented a curious sight. The little Breton sergeant and his men barred the Avenue Trudaine egress and looked on with very natural stupefaction at the runaways and the appurtenances of hanging. Landreau still wore the hempen necklace and appeared greatly excited. By the very common effect of retrospective terror, the old keeper, who had been steady at the touch of death, now shivered at the thought of the danger he had run. The humpback champed his curb, hopping from one leg to the other, and hatching falsehoods, according to his invariable habit under grave circumstances.

"What's all this, my good fellow?" demanded the sergeant, going straight up to Landreau who had no answer ready.

When a man has almost been hanged for talking too soon, he is less eager to speak out before strangers, and the Saint-Seniers' faithful servant very clearly foresaw that he was not out of danger. He was saved from death, but not from having to give his name and address under penalty of being arrested. How could he deliver himself from the hands of authority without this? The problem remained unsolvable. His embarrassment had not escaped Taupier, who judged he had better lead the conversation.

"Citizen," said he, coming forward to the non-commissioned officer, "this man is a deserter from one of your regiments; he has resisted the brave national guards who wanted to detain him and wounded several persons with a bayonet."

"Deserter? they don't take such old men as soldiers," objected the Breton with a glance at Landreau's grizzled moustache.

"Yes, yes, he has owned to it," cried several of the blackguards, beginning to recover spirit.

"It may be so after all; but that's no reason for hanging him," observed the sergeant.

"The people always have the right to execute traitors," uttered Taupier, given to this menacing formula.

"Oh, shut up, I am not talking to you," said the Breton, irritated by the humpback's domineering behaviour.

"I repeat to you, citizen, that all of us are bound to obey the people."

Valnoir's friend fancied he would soon make the little sergeant sing small by assuming his grand democratic airs, but luckily he had met a bantam who was game.

"The people!" he repeated scoffingly. "Do you call these vermin who are twenty to one to kill a poor old man 'the people?'"

"You are insulting our fellow-citizens," howled Taupier, "and I hold you responsible for whatever transpires—"

"Who cares?" interrupted the non-commissioned officer without flinching; "I know my duty. Speak up you, and tell me something of what has happened."

"I was seized hold of as I was quietly going along the street," said the keeper. "I defended myself—I was thrown down and dragged here. If you had not come with your comrades, I should have been a dead man."

"You are not in the army"

"Not now," responded Landreau, with a hesitation betraying his confusion.

"The whole matter is a fog to me," said the sergeant after an instant's silence, "and I am obliged to take you to the headquarters in the Place Vendôme. As for you," he added to the lookers-on, "any of you wanting to be witnesses can come along; and this fellow, who it strikes me stirred up all this racket, must come with me too."

It was Taupier whom he referred to, and not one of the rascals peopling the hall dared to raise his voice in objection. But this sequel did not at all delight the humpback, who did not care to appear with Landreau before a court martial. He would have to reveal his identity, and the title of contributor to the "Serpenteau" was not of a nature to win him the kindness of the staff, whom the venomous publication scarified daily. Still he comprehended that there was no means to resist a dozen rural bayonets supporting this injunction, for he could not expect any help from his dastardly associates. Still he tried to sneak out of the perplexity by a cunning side issue,

"I do not ask anything better than to follow you," he said, in a subdued tone; "but there is no need to disturb the general-in-chief; there is a guard-house close by."

The sergeant looked out on the Avenue. The weather had become dreadful, and the march to the Place Vendôme was no light burden to soldiers numb with cold, and ready to drop with weariness.

"Whereabouts is this guard-house?" inquired the Breton, wishful to spare his men.

"Only a few steps off, in the Rue Neuve-Bossuet."

"Let us be off then, and quickly, too, for we'll freeze here."

Taupier did not ask more, and Landreau, resigned to the consequences of his misadventure, went to place himself amidst the soldiers. Three or four citizens, including the gentleman with the flat side curls, offered themselves as witnesses, and all departed. The others dispersed homewards, whilst the escort crossed the Avenue at the double-quick without the contemplative policemen, still sheltered in the gateway, deigning to inquire into what was going on.

"I do not know which battalion is on sentry to-day," mused Taupier; "but I shall be in bad luck if I do not find in the guard-house some of the 'Lighters of Pipes at the Moon,' and then all will go well."

Entirely recovered from his emotion, the gamekeeper coolly calculated the remaining chances of freedom, and reasoned that the officer of the National Guards would not be very rigorous as to the military service. The journey was not long, and very few people were met—snow driving them indoors—and the gossips were busy circulating in the shops the important news of the arrest of the spy that morning. We merely note that their tales transformed Landreau into an envoy of Bismarck's sent to buy up the French government. The troop arrived at the guard-house at the very moment that the commanding officer was opening the door to go out to lunch, and Taupier uttered a growl of gladness on recognising J. B. Frapillon, general agent and captain.

NLVII.

THE prudent humpback had the presence of mind to make no sign revealing his relations with the business agent, and the latter was just the man to divine how things stood at a glance.

"Come in, gentlemen," said he, with the politeness he never lost.

He had even formed theories on this head which Taupier would not admit, namely, that the amenity of forms was absolutely necessary to cover actual violence in deed. He went so far as systematically to disdain usage of the title "citizens," so dear to revolutionists of all periods. J. B. Frapillon was a rosewater Jacobin, and he would not have asked for anybody's head unless according to the hand-books of court etiquette. The little Breton sergeant pushed the witnesses into the guard-house, followed them, and warily left his soldiers at the door. He knew by experience that the western soldiers were not very much liked by some of the national guards, who freely qualified them as Chouans and upholders of tyranny. The place was full of guardsmen whose ferocious and quarrelsome aspect well enough justified his apprehensions. Some were basking around the stove, others smoking black short pipes or playing with greasy cards. The atmosphere was loaded with nauseating miasma which the sharp tobacco fumes scarcely

neutralised, and the dainty nerves of J. B. Frapillon must have suffered. Hence he hastened to go through this pestiferous hall to conduct the newcomers into the reserved room for the officer on duty, a narrow closet, furnished with a deal table and a few straw-bottomed chairs. The business agent took his place at the former with the ease of a man accustomed to hear clients from behind a desk. He lolled back on the mouldy seat as he would have done in his green morocco arm-chair in the Rue Cadet, fixed his glasses on firmly, ran his hand over his flaming beard and commenced his interrogation with all the blandness of which he was susceptible. Contrary to what usually takes place when the accusers accused, and the representatives of public force find themselves simultaneously before the authority charged to settle the dispute, there arose no bitter recriminations and no noisy discussion.

Both Landreau and Taupier had grounds for keeping quiet, and the latter, besides, had full confidence in the sagacity of his confederate Frapillon. Therefore the sergeant finished his succinct recital of the facts without interruption. He had heard an uproar, and had found one man making as if to hang another whom he accused of desertion and rebellion, very serious crimes under the state of siege. He knew no more, and he most clearly displayed his desire to be acquitted of all responsibility in the matter. Landreau, questioned with much leniency by the urbane captain, bitterly complained of the maltreatment to which he had been subjected, and bluntly refused to give his address or occupation. This was assuredly the worst of all means of defence, but the keeper would have been much distressed to invent another, because he was, unfortunately, at daggers-drawn with the military authority. After the disappearance of his lieutenant in the night attack on Billancourt, the old servant had obtained leave to go into Paris, but it was only for a week, and a renewal was refused. It ensued that Landreau, an excellent soldier, but devoted to the Saint-Senier family, was in a sore plight. Since some six weeks that he had been hiding in the pavilion and serving the two ladies, his name and description figured in the list of deserters sent in to the governor of Paris. He, therefore, reasoned that his arrest had better be made in the street than in a visit of the soldiery to the house in the Rue de Laval. He relied on the general disorder for his not remaining indefinitely in prison.

"The worst that can befall me," he mused, "is to be identified by one of my own regiment, and then we'll see how to wriggle out of the swamp."

Though J. B. Frapillon pointed out with extreme kindness that this obstinate muteness did him much injury, Landreau persisted. The witnesses gave their evidence with remarkable agreement. Taupier, who spoke first, set the pitch for the subordinate scamps, who all declared that the good-hearted people, indignant at the *moblot's* conduct, had merely tried to apprehend him. If he were mauled a little, he had brought it upon himself by resisting, and as for the pretended attempt at hanging, it was only a simulation, an innocent practical joke intended to scare him into confession. This was the case. The laced-coated judge considered for a time and delivered his judgment with a sweetness of language that softened its vigour.

"I deeply regret, sir," he said to Landreau, "that you do not consider it meet to answer my questions, for I find myself, to my great regret, under the necessity of sending you to prison, to be detained there until your identity is established. But I hope that, in a few days, you will be set free."

This sentence did not so very much displease the prisoner, who principally dreaded being handed over to the provost-marshal. He bowed without replying, and J. B. Frapillon continued to shower his flowers of speech upon the witnesses, with a paternal smile.

"Gentlemen, I can only thank you for the zeal you have displayed on this occasion. The people are strong, but they are just, and I am fully persuaded that your intentions were pure."

"Now, this is fine! here's a true 'pal,'" muttered the man in the flat cap, "he's not like that turnip-headed sergeant."

"Two men to conduct this gentleman to the lock-up," called out the captain, rising and thrusting his head out into the guardroom.

The citizen-guardsmen had a marked vocation then for arrests, and instead of only the two men called for, half-a-dozen offered themselves to handle Landreau as usual in such cases, and cram him into the black hole for temporarily housing drunkards, vagabonds, and malefactors brought hither. Though the new tenant did not belong to any of these categories, he opposed no resistance to them. Yet he was hissed and hooted at in going through the guardroom, and but very little more would have made the occupants blame the captain's justice as too lenient.

"You can go your way, my friend," said Frapillon to the sergeant.

The Breton, while not sharing the general opinion as to the keeper's guilt, had still no desire to meddle any longer in a police charge, and did not wait for the leave to be repeated. His soldiers were kicking their heels in the street and he hastened to relieve them of this additional watch in the snow. The disgusting rogues who had borne witness scattered away at the same time with visible pleasure. They had too often figured in another position to long enjoy themselves in the station-house where the police had formerly received them. The amiable captain conducted them to the door, and did not moreover disdain to go out and take a good look at the departing soldiers. The humpback had intended to remain, but his associate gave him a glance over his spectacles to make him understand the danger of a conversation in a room with open doors. So he stole forth like the others, walking behind them all and keeping within earshot of Frapillon. Fully decided not to show his acquaintanceship with the captain before his inferiors, Taupier waited for the means of speaking the few indispensable words swiftly and secretly. Divining this intention, Frapillon manoeuvred to give him a brief interview. Whilst the Bretons fell into rank to resume the road to the barracks, he began to stamp in the snow as if to warm his feet.

"Beastly weather for going about, gentlemen," he observed, pulling the hood over his head. "I must get my blood up—it was deuced cold in my rooms."

"Going out, captain?" queried Taupier, in an uninterested tone.

"Yes, I was going over to the restaurant when you arrived, and as I am on duty till the evening, I must run out for something."

"I will give myself the pleasure of seeing you over there, if you will allow it, citizen?" said the humpback.

"So will we!" chorussed those witnesses who had not yet gone off, catching a glimpse of a glass at the corner wine-shop if only to get rid of them.

"With pleasure, gentlemen," said Frapillon, extremely vexed at this increase of escort.

They all went towards the Avenue Trudaine, Taupier despairing of

shaking off the importunate gang. But, some twenty paces farther, the ingenious captain stopped short, saying :

"Pray excuse me, gentlemen, but I forgot to give an order to my lieutenant, and I must return to the guard-house. I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you again."

With which compliment, J. B. Frapillon spun round on his heels and, as he passed the humpback who was hanging a little behind, he flung this whisper at him :

"At nine, to night, at the 'Dead Rat.'"

XLVIII.

THE Café of the Dead Rat is well known to the artists and authors who dwell in the essentially-literary region of the Place Pigalle. Its fame has even spread to the centre of the city, and more than one frequenter of the brilliant terraces of the Boulevard Montmartre does not disdain to go and sit at the modest tables of the already-legendary establishment. In winter, the varied society which favour this resort take refuge in the two ground-floor rooms, each having a pet corner, as the Painters' or Journalists' Place. On the first floor is the ladies' room, for the fair sex patronise the Dead Rat. It is the chosen haunt of a whole clan of women, clustered through taste or necessity on the southern slope of Montmartre, but these eccentric charmers do not come here to make conquests, but to end the day, as men do at their clubs, free and easily.

Most of these veteran beauties number numerous campaigns on more fashionable ground, and have retired on an income into the solitude of the outer boulevards, like the old soldiers who live on the retired list at Les Batignolles. They like to collect around a billiard-table to speak of their former conquests, and criticise the strategy of the militant youth succeeding them in the career. Beer, cigarettes, and bezique regale these simple merry-makings, and the raw recruits in silk and satin who wander by chance into this symposium look like griffins fresh from the military academy frowned down by veteran dragons. Among the lady customers, a few have literary aspirations ; there are some even who do not fear to discuss social and political topics. Hence, these independent dames dwell on a footing of fraternal intimacy with the budding novelists who study modern society as they play dominoes, and with the statesmen of the future who learn diplomacy during canons and pocketings.

The masculine element is composed of various classes, which do not mix, though they rub along together. There is the tribe of artists, the clique of literary men, and the great body of democrats, without including sight-seers, attracted in by the desire to see the celebrities of the minor press and the charms of the lady money-taker, who looks like a Watteau shepherdess gone astray in a drinking-bar. During the siege, the company was sensibly modified. Several of the old customers, summoned by the Revolution to public offices, did not come assiduously as of yore to this primary school of high politics. Others, superior to the prejudice which dubbed the absentees as "free-flyers," had flown away to paint or write in the country. The women had remained faithful to their café of predilection, and most of them had submitted to the daily ration, in order to keep near this gallant and intellectual centre. Nevertheless, there were gaps in their ranks, and the game of baccarat among bosom friends which had gone

on merrily upstairs, often languished from the erstwhile "plungers" remaining on the benches below.

Here gathered a crowd, whose costume and military bearing gave the peaceful artistic lounge the mock air of a canteen. Had it not been for the Dead Rat, painted long ago in the middle of the ceiling by a jocose painter, one would have seemed in a garrison town, a hundred leagues from the Place Pigalle. Nothing but laced caps and overcoats; quite a staff crammed the billiard-room, and there were four-handed games of piquet, where the lowest in rank was a captain. Most of these warriors belonged to the national guard, but the vicinity of the huts on the boulevard also brought some provincial soldiers. By tacit agreement, the uniformed customers occupied the first room with their hilarious revelry, whilst the party of "The Old Dead Ratters," representing the civil element, debated the daily events in the back-room beyond. As for the women, they flitted like butterflies around the tables laden with cups and glasses, and did not scorn to sip indifferently at the bellicose punch and the literary bitters. Seated upon her throne, the fair queen of this empire impartially distributed her gracious smiles upon her subjects of both sexes and all classes.

On the evening of the snowy day which had almost been poor Landreau's last on earth, the Dead Rat was crammed. All was joy and song in the entrance saloon, where the little Breton sergeant was treating half a dozen lads from Roscof and Morlaix to brandy. At the farther end, where three militia-men were regaling themselves after their last watch on the ramparts with a game at billiards, Taupier and Frapillon faced one another. On the marble-table between them rose an appalling pyramid of the saucers upon which glasses of beer had been brought and left, when the emptied glasses were removed, according to the rule in such places, to check the number of drinks. The editor and the cashier of the "Serpenteau" professed both a great esteem for beer, perhaps, because they regarded it as a social and democratic beverage; and, besides, to confer without attracting notice, they deemed it wise to appear unquenchable imbibers. Neither were regular customers, for Taupier preferred attending the High Radical Temple of the Café de Madrid, and J. B. Frapillon, as a financial man and business agent, considered it due to his professional dignity not to patronise public houses. Hence, they had all the chances of avoiding inopportune meetings in this retired spot. The numerous lookers-on at the billiard-table served them as screens, and the military gentlemen in the outer room could not remark their confabulation. The neighbouring tables were occupied, that on the left by two long-haired painters playing at écarté at "fifteen up, best out of three," for a six-sou packet of tobacco, and that to the right, by three women chattering over cherry brandy. So they had managed to exchange many interesting confidences, and no one had troubled their hour's colloquy. On laying aside his uniform, Frapillon had resumed the correct bearing and manners of what is called a man settled down to life's responsibilities, and the humpback, sitting with his gibbosity to the wall, hid from the public the chief defect of his grotesque form.

"So our man is undeniably put away," said Taupier, gratified.

"Ay, and for a good long while, I'll answer for it; I have friends at the prison, and I recommended him strongly to them."

"Nevertheless," sighed the deformed one, "I would rather they had strung him up by the neck in the Rollin College—it was so simple and con-

venient. If it had not been for that ass of a moblot, we should have been rid of him for ever."

"Bah! vagabondage and resistance to public officers, though he were not a deserter, will get him six months, and in the meantime we shall have finished with the Saint-Seniers and all their tribe."

"None but the dead never come back," commented Taupier, with a sombre air.

"You are always going in for desperate remedies. A fault, my boy, a great fault. Men can be made away with, without killing. With my method, one does not risk the assize court."

"There has been none since the siege," said the humpback, "and we shall put the old thing down altogether if the Lighters of Pipes at the Moon only get into power."

"I hope they will; meanwhile, I believe we ought not to get into scrapes. 'Gentleness, nothing but gentleness!' that's my system."

"A pretty system! We have been two months hammering away gently at those people, and we have not half done our work."

"Taupier, my son, you are not fair. Sum it up. When you came to me at the end of September, Valnoir and Company had everything to fear. Five or six persons played with its secret, among them a drunken man and three women. You hardly knew which way to go at them. But now Master Pilevert is coupled to our train, enrolled in our Red Band, and he would even aid us against the common enemy, if he could only be sobered."

"Yes," grumbled Taupier, "and some dry day when he has drunk more than usual he'll sell us all."

"He cannot drink more than usual, for he is soaking it in night and day," observed Frapillon, smiling. "Now, hark back to his pupil, as he calls her, the dumb gipsy. She was dangerous, and I own that I did not see very clearly how to spirit her away. Who was it gave Mouchabeuf such cunning and prudent instructions to send her to Germany, whence she will never return, instead of dropping her into the Saint-Martin canal, where her body would have been fished up?"

"Confound it, I advise you to go boasting about that—your champion idiot sent her to Saint-Germain to join the wounded Saint-Senier, who will take us in the rear along with her one of these days."

"He's died in the hospital, my good friend. Mouchabeuf received the tidings from his friends, the Prussians and as for the fortune-teller, it seems to me she has had ample time to get back if she had not been for six weeks' past travelling on the road to Berlin."

"Nothing proves that, and I am not easy."

"The gamekeeper who bothered us," continued Frapillon, without heeding the other's fears, "is boxed up for a long while."

"The merit is due to me," broke in Taupier, smartly; "if I had not bribed Bourignard and his wasp of a son, we should never have got hold of the old badger, and, besides—"

"There are the two women yet," went on the agent.

"Ay, and so long as they are not in our power, we may as well not have commenced."

"Soundly reasoned; but we shall soon have them."

"Let me alone. You cannot send them to Prussia or have them arrested by the men of your company."

"No," agreed Frapillon, coldly, "but—"

"Well?"

"I have my plan."

XLIX.

"YOUR plan?" repeated Taupier, snapping his fingers. "Upon my word, you make me laugh with your sweet and gentle means, and your plans. We all know what plans are good for," added the wit, who had more than once attacked the Government of National Defence.

"Mine is infallible and you will thank me for it before the week's out," returned J. B. Frapillon, imperturbably.

"Let me alone, I say! You can never act with regard to two women living retired as we have towards a strolling player and a deserter."

"No, but I shall try another thing, with the same result."

"We shall see," sneered Taupier in an unconvinced tone. "Waiter, two beers!" squeaked he, blessed with unquenchable thirst.

The quantity of liquor he absorbed and the consequential airs he put on, began to make an impression on his table companions. The manufacturers of "pot-boilers" on his left gazed with admiration on a man rich enough to call for drink every quarter of an hour and the women darted side glances at him. One of them, a majestic beauty of forty, who was consoling herself in politics for the definite loss of her former worshippers, had imagined there was a fresh devotee under Taupier's twisted and angular form. Once having this idea in her romantic brain, the matron had no other aim than to win the attention of the gibbose editor and to do so she began speaking for the public in general.

"Yes, my little pussies, as true as I am telling you," uttered this socialist and democratic gossip, "there's queer things going on in this quarter."

"Tell us what, M^{me} Irma?" ingenuously solicited a young adept, whom the hardships of the siege had restricted to these inhospitable heights, and who had been only two days since initiated into the arcana of the Dead Rat.

"There's plotting going on, child," said the exuberant dame in a contralto voice.

"You don't say so?" exclaimed, with a dumfounded air, the loveable girl who answered to the mythological name of Aglæ, though she possessed nothing in common with the fairest of the Three Graces.

"Well, what if there are plots?" queried another devourer of cherry brandy, a thin creature who seemed to have met with misfortunes long before the war.

"What of it?" repeated M^{me} Irma, indignantly, "it strikes me that a citizeness only does her duty when she shows up traitors."

"I am not a citizeness, I am a Picardian," said Aglæ, who enjoyed but vague notions respecting her civic rights.

"And I never play the detective," said the dried-up idol, completing the trio.

"Phémie, you always speak of what you know nothing about," said the fat lady; "if you had allowed me to finish, you would have learnt that I never play the detective on anybody, but, nevertheless, I have my eyes."

"What did you see, M^{me} Irma?" interrupted the neophyte.

"You know that I have a fifth-floor front in the Rue de Laval," continued the elephantine Irma,

"Everybody knows that, as well as your owing three quarters', as the portress told me," muttered Phémie, who had the one reputation, if no other, of having the sharpest tongue in the Dead Rat.

"Are you going to stick up for the landlords now?" shrilly asked the obese presiding genius of this little congress.

"Don't get angry, M'ame Irma," interposed the guileless Aglæ, gulping down a cherry, as she preferred preserved fruit to wrangles.

"Not much, especially as there are none left now," responded Phémie. "I haven't paid my own for a year, and I am none the more grieved for that."

"I was remarking," went on Irma with superb dignity, "that my windows command the street, so that I can see all that goes on over the way."

"Why, there's a wall opposite," jeered the sceptical Phémie.

"Yes; but behind that wall there is a garden which runs back to the Rue de Navarin, and in its midst is a pavilion inhabited by persons who—what do you think, eh, my girl?"

At first the humpback had paid no heed to this feminine verbiage, but for a moment he had been lending an attentive ear, without appearing to do so. Frapillon had knocked his knee under the table, and given him a wink as much as to say, "Chance is serving us wonderfully well again—let us profit by it." Hence their chat, which had run on in an undertone, ceased altogether, as with mutual accord they followed their stout neighbour's discourse. To cover their eavesdropping, Frapillon took up a paper, and Taupier lighted a pipe. This was the best means to excite the loquacity of Irma, who continued without dropping her lofty airs.

"Two women—an old and a young one—who come from heaven knows where, and never go out and never have callers—and a greybeard to wait on them, and do the marketing—what do you think of that, my pets?"

"Well?" said the thin dame, "there's no law against having a manservant and hugging your fire."

"And you'll bear in mind that it is not pleasant out of doors," judiciously observed Aglæ; "if I had plenty of fuel to keep me cosy, you would not often see me in the street."

"That's all very fine," resumed Irma, "but at all events you are known in the quarter—"

"Too widely," commented Phémie in a stage whisper.

"Whilst these princesses of the pavilion are known to nobody by name, no more than by their business, or by the time they arrived there. The place belongs to an aristocrat, some country nobleman who never shows his nose in it himself, and pays his rates and taxes through his banker; the tax-gatherer's clerk told me so the other day in the Jean-Goujon beer-shop."

"For sure all this is not natural," said Aglæ, making dreadful efforts to understand.

"Wait a bit, I have not done. Every evening, my children, at the same hour, about eight, sometimes sooner, sometimes later, I see—"

"What?" queried the two damsels in unison, for their senior took time over the moving narrative like a cunning actress.

"A light which flares out on the top of the tiles and is put out before midnight, and a green light, too!"

"Green?" repeated the youthful Aglæ, bewildered.

"A signal, of course," said Phémie, who seemed deeply versed in signalling tricks,

"Ha, ha!" cried Irma, triumphantly, "now do you believe that I would be right in going round to the police to denounce these jokers?"

"They would not be punished for nothing," admitted the stern Phémie.

Frapillon darted a meaning glance at Taupier. Aglæ had her considering cap on.

"Tell me, M'ame Irma," inquired the simple child after her half a minute's deliberation, "is not the younger party in mourning?"

"Both are, and full mourning, too."

"And good looking, eh?"

"Pooh! a faded blonde, with a complexion like paper and the figure of a broom-stick," said Irma who, we remember, was dark, and massive and ruddy.

"It's the same."

"Come, come, you cannot know her when I tell you they never come out of the house."

"She did this evening, and I am sure it was her, for I was just passing your house when I spied her closing that little door in the wall facing you."

"No such thing! where would she be going?"

"I am going to tell you all about it," responded Aglæ, not sorry to perorate in her turn. "Just imagine that I turned round to have a good look at her, for she is immensely pretty, I can tell you! when she came up to me, and in a sweet voice—oh, how tremendously sweet!"

"Get on with your story," growled the stout dame, never relishing the elegy of others.

"She said to me: 'Madame, will you kindly point out a shop where I may buy bread?' I was out getting my things in for dinner myself, so I told her to come along with me, and together we went along the Rue de Laval. On the way, I tried to strike up a chat; but she only answered yes and no, and it seemed to me as if she felt like weeping most. Truth to tell, that shut me up, and I did not keep on talking. Well, we got to the baker's, at the corner of the Rue Condorcet; he was just closing his shop. We went in and she asked for a loaf, but in such a queer way that anybody could plainly see that she had never been used to go marketing."

"A greenhorn," sneered Irma.

"Your card, madame!" said the 'doughy.' She did not seem to know what that was."

"Don't you see, the old man did all that for them?"

"Do you even belong round here?" asked the man. Whereupon the tall, fair party mumbled three or four words, and turned still whiter in the gills. I started to speak up for her, but I had my trouble for my pains, for she had turned about and was already hurrying up the Rue des Martyrs."

"Just what I was telling you," said the ruling spirit, enchanted at her prognostic being verified. "I should rather think they were suspicious women who have that fear of being found out that they will not book their names for a baker's card."

"And get their victuals in by a man; I'll wager the Prussians settle the bill," adjoined Phémie.

"Pshaw! that's nothing," said the ingenuous girl. "I don't know anything about the old lady; but the young one is nice, and I cannot believe that she would do anyone harm."

"Oh, hold your tongue! she's got two faces under her hood."

Since the trio's chattering had taken this entrancing turn, the two friends had not lost a syllable. Taupier smoked ardently, and blew clouds upon clouds so that he had finally enveloped himself like a god on Olympus. Frapillon, turning half round on his seat, kept up the newspaper as a screen for his play of features. By this strategy, the clandestine allies could make signs with impunity, and even exchange a few emphatic words.

"Hunger drives the wolves out of the woods," muttered Taupier. "When the servant went, no more provisions came in."

"Yes, my dear," fulminated Irma's grave voice, "I shall go and tell the police to-morrow."

"What do you think now of my plan?" inquired Frapillon in a low tone, as he adjusted his glasses.

His mis-shapen friend was going to reply, when a terrible uproar arose in the outer room.

L.

It was the clamour of angry voices serving as a bass accompaniment to the sharp crash of broken glass.

"I tell you that I want a quart of old brandy," shouted a hoarse-throated customer, "and I can pay for your smashed crockery, I can, by the trumpets of Jericho! Do you think I haven't got any money?"

"Turn him out," cried the chorus, principally composed of the mobiles, and led by the little sergeant.

It was evident that an over-excited tippler had upset a table on his neighbours, and that a storm was brewing. Little eager to meddle in a drunken battle, Frapillon and Taupier were consulting one another by a glance as to whether they had not better levant, when the latter, struck by something peculiar in the solo rising above the uproar, motioned his associate to listen.

"Turn who out?" queried the rough voice: "you had better come and try it, you pack of shirks."

"It will be done pretty soon, if you don't hold your tongue," replied a much calmer voice.

"Oh, it's you, you raw recruit, who want to have a go with the Rampart of Avallon. Well, we'll have some sport out of this."

"Tis he! that brute Pilevert; let us cut away unless we mean to be brought into this row," whispered Taupier.

"Oh, no," breathed Frapillon, "let us stay, on the contrary, to prevent him making a fool of himself."

The riot increased in the outer room and a regular fight seemed imminent. The players at billiards left off and helped to make up the ring, leaning on their cues like lancers on their lances. Desirous of not losing so interesting a sight, the women crowded up behind them to complete the audience. The general agent and the humpback thought it advisable to have a peep at the coming conflict, and softly squeezed in among the lookers-on. The outer hall looked like the scene of a prize fight. The table overturned by Pilevert had strewn the floor with its ruins, and the prudent customers had got up on their seats to be out of reach of the blows. In the middle of the ring, our Samson, as red as a peony and quivering with wrath, was striking what he sought to make a fighting gladiator's attitude. But intoxication marred his good intention, and badly interfered with the correctness of his pose. In vain

did he rub his hands after the traditional manner of wrestlers and shoot up his biceps by shutting his arms, he could not manage to recover the faultless position which had so often won him universal applause from enlightened amateur boxers at country fairs. It was clear that this mass of brawn was not steady, and that the colossus of village roads was faulty at the base, and the Dead Rat's connoisseurs indulged in some quips which raised Pilevert's ire to its highest pitch.

"Come on, you worthless moblot, till I crumple you all up!" he roared, stamping on the ground with his right foot, like a fencing-master making the appeal.

The little Breton sergeant, who had volunteered as champion of the revellers disturbed and insulted by the Hercules, did not appear in any wise intimidated by his rhodomontades. Without heeding the feminine protests either, the sergeant shoved aside the simpletons who called for the quite chimerical intervention of the police, and advanced with the greatest calmness up to the furious bully.

"Now, then, do you mean you won't leave us alone?" he demanded, in his most serene voice.

A growl was the strong man's only rejoinder, as he stepped forward to grasp his feeble enemy. His leg of mutton fists embraced the empty air, for the little David had suddenly stooped, and with his lowered head, like a ram or a negro, he butted the unfortunate Pilevert in the mid vest button, so that he tottered back for a second, and finally pitched backwards amongst the billiard players.

"That's how we fight 'rough-and-tumble' at Saint-Thégonec Fair," remarked the victor, regaining his place at the end table.

Applause was not lacking, and once more it was seen that vigorous deeds always overcome popular prejudices, for the spectators, ill-disposed towards the Bretons, nevertheless took their side.

"Bravo, moblot!" shouted the national guards of the higher ranks.

"Put that drunken beast out!"

"Take him to the lock-up!"

A little more and the vanquished Goliath would have been seized neck and heels and flung unceremoniously into the gutter. But he found protectors whom he had not expected. Whilst he was floundering about the bystanders' legs and trying to get upon his feet without success, J. B. Frapillon, who never lost his wits, had already devised the means to save him. He would have handed him over to the gentleman in black with the best of hearts, but he was well aware of the danger of letting the gentleman in national guards' uniform handle him. Despite all his defects, the man of muscle was one of the indispensable pawns of the game played by the Ruc Cadet strategist, and it was important to have him always handy. Taupier, less profound in his calculations, would have willingly given up the mountebank, and plucked at his partner's sleeve to draw him into the street. But the latter repulsed him by a nudge of the elbow, and charitably stooped down to help the conquered man to rise. When he succeeded in extricating him from the maze of chairs and footstools amongst which he had rolled, he forestalled his exclamations of surprise by whispering these significant words:

"Not a word about us unless you want to lose your pay." Aloud he added: "The poor fellow is not well and needs attention."

"He's dead drunk and needs salts," observed one of the artists who had left their sixtieth game to contemplate the scuffle.

"There's no law on that head, and a citizen may enjoy himself in time of siege," remarked Taupier, to sing in concord with his associate. "And a little upsets a fasting stomach."

"Quite so, in fact."

"It's a shame that the Breton was allowed to knock him about."

"Let's avenge him."

These exclamations came from the billiard players. A fresh battle was not agreeable to the astute J. B. Frapillon, who hastened to quell the storm.

"Gentlemen," observed he, with his habitual politeness, "I think that would be a mistake, for the rurals outnumber us, and besides it would be disagreeable to the fair mistress of the establishment."

This latter argument produced a decided effect on the gallant militiamen, who deployed in good order back to the billiard table, whilst Pilevert's preserver added:

"I will see this poor fellow home."

Since the Hercules had succeeded in recovering his perpendicular position, he was divided between the wrath still seething in his bruised breast, and the amazement caused by the appearance of the two friends.

The surreptitious warning addressed him by J. B. Frapillon, had penetrated his thick skull, still muddled with drink, and he had not dared to open his mouth for fear of emitting some nonsense. He professed for the business-agent an admiration mingled with fear, and also respected the humpback's mysterious power, which had obtained him an excellent place in the "Serpenteau's" nest. Hence he repressed, as best he could, his overwhelming rage at the Rampart of Avallon, professor to the gymnasium of Saint-Gaudens, being "downed" by a weakling whom he had expected to crush at the first blow.

"Pull yourself together, my good fellow," said J. B. Frapillon paternally, "and come with us. My friend and I will see you home."

The athlete replied with dull groans, which might pass for a consent, and the business-agent, who wished to profit by the "shindy," as sailors say, hastened to pay the waiter the united scores, including the cost of the glass broken by the strong man. This formality accomplished, he pushed the humpback towards the door, offered his arm to Pilevert, and drew him into the street. This scarcely triumphant exit was certainly accompanied by some hooting from the outer hall, mostly occupied by the Breton mobiles; but nobody thought of actually harassing the retreat. The three acolytes had barely reached the middle of the Rue Frochot before Frapillon let go the mountebank's arm, and addressed this emphatic speech to him:

"I told you before, Monsieur Pilevert, that I did not mind your drinking at home, but that I forbade you going out drunk into public places where your fooleries might seriously injure the association to which you have the honour to belong."

"No—not m—m—my fault, and I'll tell you all about how it was," stammered the strong man, feeling the intoxication more in the open air.

"This time again I will overlook it, but I warn you that at the next cutting of such capers, you will have to deal with me—with me alone, do you hear?"

"Yes, yes, I hear right enough," mumbled Pilevert, quaking at the bare idea of falling into the grasp of the dreaded general-agent.

"Well, where do you live?" asked the latter bluntly.

"Not far from here—in Montmartre," said the drunkard, his tongue getting thicker and thicker.

"I know where he hangs out," observed Taupier.

"Then help me to get him along ; if we let go of him, he will be picked up and that would get us into a worse tangle."

"You may as well let him be run over in the gutter here," said the humpback, always preferring radical measures.

Nevertheless he assisted his friend fairly, and the pair each holding the athlete by an arm, stumbled on for the Place Pigalle. At the very moment they were coming out of the Rue Frochot, a woman walking fast shot before them and stepped into the luminous ray before the "Dead Rat's" lighted front. By the subdued glare, projected through the steamy panes, the form and features of this night rambler struck the keen eyes of J. B. Frapillon, who stopped short.

"Did you recognise her?" he quickly asked Taupier.

LI.

TAUPIER was too deeply engaged in sustaining Pilevert's staggering steps to pay much heed to passers-by. The enormous mass, since Frapillon let go one side, weighed entirely on the frail crippled being, and threatened, at any moment, to go down and flatten him under it in the kennel.

"Recognise whom?" snarled Taupier, in very bad humour. "You had better help me instead of stopping to quiz the first night-walker we meet."

"Hush, you idiot!" returned the business-agent in an undertone. "Chance is serving us better than you deserve. The woman who just passed is the young lady from the pavilion."

"It can't be!" exclaimed the humpback, starting so as almost to throw the inebriate down.

"I am sure of it," laconically replied J. B. Frapillon. "Stand still and see what she is up to."

After having passed the lighted corner by the "Dead Rat," the woman had sprang out upon the Place Pigalle, then utterly deserted. The snow continued to fall, and the pavement disappeared under a thick white carpet. The fountain occupying the centre of the wide square was hung with icicles, and the frozen water in the basin still bore the traces of the slides made by the little rascals during the day. With its leafless trees and the silent booths on the outer boulevard, this part of Paris represented very fairly one of those winter-scenes so dear to some painters of the Restoration period. To venture alone in such weather in this solitary district, a young lady required very grave motives, and Frapillon had made no mistake. To begin with, he had chosen an excellent spot to see without being seen and, pressed against the front of the café, the subtle cashier of the "Serpenteau" attentively followed Renée de Saint-Scnier's movements. At that moment he felt the sensations of a spider watching the flutter of a poor fly around the web in which it was doomed to be ensnared. Not that he had espoused, without misgivings, the cause of his friends Valnoir, Taupier, and the rest of them, against the dwellers in the pavilion. The perplexity of his fair client, Rose de Charmière, did not itself overmuch affect him, but, by dint of plumbing the secrets of others, he had, finally, interested himself personally in the plot of which he held all the wires. Outside of his actions on account of the Red Band, the bachelor of the Rue Cadet pur-

sued the execution of a private plan. Hence, for the time being, he thought mainly of shaking himself free of two burdensome accomplices.

"Where can she be going, and how can I manage to follow her without having this pair of sots at my heels?" pondered he.

The former problem seemed difficult to solve, for, after having started to cross the Place, the young lady was now wandering along the southern side of this open space. Her pace was uneven; she stopped at every door and looked up; then resumed her ramble as though she could not find what she sought. This strange behaviour baffled all the agent's surmises. At first he remembered M^{me} Irma's revelations in the "Dead Rat," and for an instant his notion was that Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier was still in search of a baker's. But at so late an hour, the supposition became so unreasonable that he did not dwell long upon it. Yet it was evident that the nocturnal promenader had been brought out on some serious errand. She showed unequivocal tokens of agitation, and had there been anybody about in this solitude, she must have been taken for a lunatic. After much hesitation and many turns, she ended by going up to the doorway of a large house at the corner of the Rue Pigalle, where a whole colony of artists are harboured. J. B. Frapillon thought at first she was going to ring up the door-keeper, but he saw her bend down to read all the names engraved on brass plates beside the bell-knob, rise with a despairing shake of the head and flee away. It was a ray of enlightenment for him.

"I have it!" he muttered, thrilling with delight, "and now I shall be out of luck if I do not attain my ends." Grasping the humpback's arm, he said curtly:

"Take care of this drunkard, since you know his dwelling; I must follow our princess."

This injunction, for several reasons, was not to Taupier's liking. To begin with, he had not unlimited confidence in his associate and wanted to have him under his eyes on decisive occasions. Then again the care and escorting of Pilevert constituted a task by far exceeding the powers of Valnoir's afflicted aide-de-camp. Overcome by the chill which concentrated the alcoholic fumes, the strong man was nearing the final stage of intoxication, which fells the robust and may kill the weak. Taupier had succeeded in propping him up against a wall somehow or other, and held him pretty nearly erect with his long arms as "shores." The showman stared with owl eyes and grumbled disconnected words, through the midst of which issued insults upon his conqueror.

"Where is that—that 'Aztec' of a sergeant?" sighed he betwixt a couple of hiccoughs. "Where is he that I may flatten him?"

The humpback did not care to respond, but every now and then the other steadied himself a little on his weakened legs and made efforts to break away, howling:

"I want to go back to the 'soaking-shop' to settle him. Help me along, my little camel-man, and open the door for me."

"Confound it all!" said Taupier, losing patience, "how do you expect me to guard this sponge?"

This appeal to J. B. Frapillon produced no other effect than to goad him into being off the sooner.

"Do as you please—I have no time to tarry," answered he, darting away.

"Neither have I, and you shall not go after the 'donna' alone," shouted

the humpback, pushing Pilevert away ; but it was a bad idea to attempt it with insufficient muscular force.

The athlete comprehended that it was his wish to get rid of him, so he clutched Taupier's collar with unconquerable energy. This vigour, doubled by the stubbornness peculiar to men brutified by alcohol, quickly reduced the resistance of the feeble deformed antagonist to nought.

"Let go of me, you elephant!" gasped the unfortunate man, half-choked by the grip.

Nothing came of his appeal except that the grip was even more tightened. Meanwhile J. B. Frapillon pursued the even tenor of his chase without heeding the objurgations, and the distress of his acolyte. Furious at this disloyal casting of him off, the captive risked a desperate stroke. He thrust his short legs between the huge columns sustaining the mountebank's herculean body and tripped him up pursuant to the classic method of Parisian urchins. Agricola himself would have accorded his approbation to the trick which succeeded marvellously well. Sapped at the base, the colossus slipped abruptly on the frost covered flags and came down with the shock of an uprooted oak. Unfortunately, the pigmy who felled this oak had not foreseen all the consequences. In falling Pilevert did not release him and hence drew him down too.

"Help, help!" screamed Taupier, choking under the crushing weight.

But the brawny fellow, in sprawling over the snow, had lost the little sense left him, and simply weighed down the hapless abortion like a paper-weight on a fly.

At the same time the pitiless Frapillon gained a start and disappeared behind the fountain without having deigned to turn round. He was enchanted at the ridiculous accident which delivered him from the gnome, and he would have roared with laughter but for his having more serious matters before him just then. The first was not to lose sight of the woman who rapidly traversed the Place. She went straight up to the houses that had their backs to the Butts-Montmartre, amid a silence so profound that her hunter heard the crust of the snow crunched under her hurried steps. Taupier's outcries had no power to attract her attention, and it was clear that she was pursuing an aim interesting enough to absorb all her faculties. Moreover the victim soon ceased yelling, either because he had given up his last breath beneath the Hercules or deemed it prudent to slip away. Therefore Frapillon had an open field, and he lost not a minute in putting into execution the project just springing up in his mind.

"How shall I get to speak with her? the whole question lies there," he reasoned as he manoeuvred to keep his distance.

The young lady had turned to the left and made for the mass of houses by a short cut over the roadway. Once on the pavement she went up the right hand side, again scrutinizing the doors and signs.

"If I go directly up to her, she is likely to take alarm and run away," thought Frapillon.

He imagined a more artful move. In a few strides he gained the other side near the Rue des Martyrs, glided along the empty booths and kept to the left, taking care to go slowly. This ingenious detour would bring him face to face with his quarry, without startling her by a sudden appearance. Indeed, at the top of the little Rue Houdon, which runs up to Montmartre, the lucky Frapillon saw the lovely Renée de Saint-Senier coming towards him. He was cudgelling his brains for a plausible

means of addressing her, when she cut his quandary short by accosting him herself in these words:

"A doctor, sir! pray point me out some doctor's house!"

"I guessed aright," thought Frapillon.

LII.

RENÉE DE SAINT-SENIER stood before the agent, pale and frightened, repeating tremulously:

"A doctor! for pity's sake, sir, show me to a doctor's."

On seeing her go from door to door, he had by intuition a shrewd idea of the motive urging her to run about at midnight, and he was prepared to profit by the unlooked-for encounter. His first thought was to take her to a medical friend, a person thoroughly devoted to the cause defended by the "Serpenteau," and residing in the neighbourhood, but on second thoughts he threw up this project. He professed the principle that a man ought always to do his own work and to avoid increasing the number of his confidants. Furthermore, he had private reasons for acting alone that evening, and his siege preparations were all made when he confronted the object of his enterprise.

"Looking for medical assistance, eh, madame?" he queried in his softest voice; "has some accident befallen you?"

"Nothing to me, sir, but to a—a person in danger of death, so I entreat you to point out to me—"

"I can do better than that, madame, I can accompany you to the ailing person!"

"What! are you—"

"A physician, yes, madame, and entirely at your service."

Renée gazed heavenward, as if in gratitude for the help sent to her.

"Oh, thanks, thanks, sir," she said effusively.

"I am only doing my duty," said Frapillon, modestly, "and I am happy that chance placed me across your path."

"Come, I entreat, for the danger is pressing," went on the lady, turning towards the Place.

"Accept my arm, madame," said the pretended physician, who meant not to lose his patient's friend on the road.

Renée answered with a shake of the head at first, and boldly darted away on the slippery pavement; but Frapillon would not admit he was beaten.

"Believe me, madame, that you will get along faster with my help," he said, bending his arm with all the politeness of which he was capable.

This time she yielded. A thaw had set in, and the partly melting snow rendered walking very difficult over a sloping ground.

"I hold her at last," rejoiced the agent, as he felt the young lady's arm on his.

Thus, unwittingly supported by her most dangerous persecutor, she hastened to gain the entrance of the Rue Froehot, whilst her escort fretted because he would have to pass close to where he had left Taupier and Pilevert rolling over one another. He tried to allure Renée's attention by a chat, and as he did not like useless conversation, he took care to direct his questions on points he wished to have enlightened.

"Don't you think, madame," he gently suggested, "that, whilst I am

giving our patient the most pressing attentions, you had better send for your regular attendant?"

"We have none—we know no one," answered Renée in some trouble.

Just what the business-agent wanted to ascertain, for he did not care to expose himself to meeting a genuine physician.

"Oh, then, I undertake the case, willingly," he proceeded with a satisfied air, "for professional etiquette, madame, as well as my own scruples, would make me shrink from interfering with a colleague's patients."

Renée started, as though this speech had awakened a painful idea in her.

"Sir," said she in a shaken voice, "you have nothing to fear in that respect, but I am bound to inform you that we are not rich, and that—"

"Aha!" thought Frapillon, "this is good to know."

"We may not be able, at once—"

"Madame," interrupted the business-agent, "I must tell you—"

"But, hereafter," the young lady hastened to add, "whatever may be your estimate of the value of your attentions, sir, we shall be happy to acknowledge them."

"You did not allow me to finish," pursued her perfidious escort, with a smile. "I wished to set you at ease on that very point, for I practise medicine only out of humanity. I am well enough off to require nothing of my patients, and I can even do them a kindness," he continued, with rather too emphatic a tone.

"Thank you, doctor, we require nothing but your science," said the young lady, whose pride was aroused.

"Pray, believe me, madame, that I had no intention of offending you," he eagerly replied.

He perceived he had overshot the mark, and, to repair his fault, he redoubled his cares, gently sustaining Renée every time her little feet slipped, and, at the same time, edging her over upon the side-walk opposite the "Dead Rat." At bottom, the cashier of the "Serpenteau" could scarce contain his delight, since he commenced to see clearly into the situation of the ladies of the pavilion. His subtle spirit, served by his perfect knowledge of city life, pictured to him the Saint-Seniers surprised by the siege, shut up in town with resources almost expended, and reduced to the last extremity by the absence of their imprisoned kinsman and the disappearance of the faithful Landreau. Poverty achieved the placing at his disposal of the women already suspected of treason through the seclusion surrounding them, and the worthy Frapillon reckoned without fail to make the most of their misfortune.

"Have we still far to go?" he inquired, with most tender interest.

"Such dreadful walking fatigues you, and I fear—"

"At the end of that street, on the left, we shall be there," said the young lady, whose agitation augmented as they approached the pavilion.

They were almost at the café, and, ere doubling this perilous cape, the agent was the less at ease as he heard muffled sounds, and saw a dark mass on the snow.

"Those are drunken men—let us get by quickly," he whispered to his companion, who needed no spur to hasten her pace.

The prudent Frapillon's fears were well-founded, for in turning into the Rue Frochot, he saw a tumultuous crowd only twenty paces off.

"That bully Pilevert has taunted all the people in the restaurant into rushing out," he thought. "I only hope Taupier does not spy us."

He kept close to the other houses opposite, endeavouring to pass the mob

unperceived. His conjectures as to the conduct of the pair, were only too well founded. While he went off on Renée's track, the humpback, buried beneath the oppressive carnal mass, made efforts to get clear which were finally crowned by partial success. He had toilsomely risen upon his knees, but every time that he tried to rise fully, to make off, down came the herculean paw upon his frame and bore it to the pavement. The unfortunate wretch found himself in about the same sad situation as a cockchafer caught by a limb, and this unequal struggle might have continued indefinitely had not two or three customers coming out of the "Dead Rat" stumbled over the human mass upon the flags. These boon companions had charitably set to work disentangling the skein; but Pilevert aroused by the touch, had begun kicking out terribly right and left, and the humpback, catching one rough kick, uttered yells of pain. This was ample to bring the billiard and domino players from their games, and all the inquisitive crew swarmed out of the peaceful café to see what was going on in the street. After a little confusion, the newcomers managed to understand it, and the Hercules, who had been held in but unpleasant memory from his scuffle inside, was soundly trounced. At the very moment when Frapillon, with Renée on his arm, approached this noisy gathering, some were hauling the unlucky mountebank towards the Place Bréda station-house. The agent was doing his best to slip by along the house fronts, but the cohort completely barred the way, stopped every moment by Pilevert's frenzied resistance. Blows and cuffs were hailing upon the centre of the knot, and Frapillon was vexed to distinguish Taupier's harsh voice protesting against his being mixed up with his adversary's case.

"Wasn't I quite right to cut those creatures?" thought the man of law and order, skirting the doorways, "and how wise I shall be to work out my plans by myself in future!"

At any other time Renée would have certainly turned back from such a quarrelsome crowd, but her feelings overcame the timidity of a young lady.

"Do let us hurry on, sir, I implore you," she said, pressing her cavalier's arm.

He reflected that the best course was to get out of the trouble as soon as possible, and so he resolutely set to clearing the mob. The enterprise was facilitated by the broadening of the road-way, there being a circus at the other end of the Rue Frochot, and the couple were able to turn to the left to reach the pavilion entrance. Only, chance would have it that a cluster of ladies turned back for the café, chattering on the events of the evening. The business agent believed he recognised his three neighbours of the inner saloon, but he was too eager to get on to much attend to this meeting, and rapidly continued on the way to the Rue de Laval. Unfortunately, M^{me} Irma and her pupil Aglæ had excellent eyes, and both recognised the young lady.

"This is rich!" ejaculated the matron, "that 'swell' again!"

"And the gentleman we saw just now giving her his arm," cried the young representative of Picardy.

"Perhaps he's taking her to the baker's," added Phémie, jeeringly.

"That will be worth seeing," proceeded the judicious Irma, and the trio sprang away on the track with a common impulse.

Frapillon did not look round. He let himself be guided by his charge, feigning to be unaware whither she led him, and not failing to express astonishment when she stopped at the little door sunk in the wall.

"Be pleased to follow me, sir," said Renée, after having touched the spring which caused the door to turn on its hinges.

Dissimulating his glee, Frapillon walked in, and the door closed noiselessly.

LIII.

J. B. FRAPILLON'S heart beat quickly as he crossed the threshold of the low door which gave access to the pavilion, whose occupants he had been watching for some two months past. His feelings were those of a general whom an unexpected hazard has suddenly introduced within the walls of a long beleaguered stronghold. At the outset of the undertaking, the cashier of the "Serpenteau" had only seen a stroke of business, one of the reprehensible cases which constituted the base of his calling and were styled dubious by him with an euphemism rather far-fetched. A little later, personal feeling had stepped in, and he had enjoyed the success of his combinations like a true artiste, their superiority over Taupier's coarse proceedings being manifest. Finally, by dint of going deeply into the affair and enlightening himself as to the possessors of the secret which worried his friends, the plotter of the Rue Cadet had come to regard the scheme from a new point of view. Naturally and by principle a circumspect man, J. B. Frapillon never started on a campaign without assuring himself beforehand of an advantageous retreat.

He had clearly foreseen the event of luck turning against the democratic league directed by Valnoir, upheld by Taupier and inspired by the lovely Rose de Charmière. It seemed wise to have friends in both camps, and, whilst lending himself to the operations of the band as regarded the Saint-Senier family, he only waited for the occasion to shape his course in his own way. This occasion was furnished him by the most fortuitous meeting, and he promised himself thus to obtain a footing near the ladies of the pavilion, without being embroiled with their persecutors. He was a little burdened by the part of physician which he had thought fit to assume, but nature had endowed him with such effrontery that he was quite capable of extricating himself. To commence encasing his real personality in the assumed one, he felt compelled to address a professional query to the young lady:

"How long since did this ailment begin?" he inquired, gravely, whilst following Renée up the linden walk.

"Just now—a sudden attack. I was alone, and ran out for help."

"Then, let us hasten. A remedy can never arrive too soon in such accidents," rejoined the false practitioner in a sententious voice.

He had no need to recommend haste to Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, for she flew as speedily as the yielding snow would allow and the delay, caused by the crowd in the Rue Frochot had wrung tokens of impatience from her. The avenue and the porch steps were swiftly passed over, and, still guided by the young lady, Frapillon penetrated into the mysterious abode, not without emotion. Renée's precipitation in going forth was testified to by the doors remaining open, and by the lamp-light at the end of the passage the room where Régine had been welcomed on the night of her abduction was plainly visible. Pallid and motionless, her eyes closed in her drooping head, Madame de Muire lay extended in an arm-chair. She wore so closely the aspect of the dead that the false doctor was at first deceived. He was already rejoicing at a sequel which delivered him from the obligation to

exercise his usurped profession, and which served his projects so well, when the young lady threw herself down by her aunt's knees, and took her hands with feverish ardour; at the burning touch the sufferer started and heaved a long sigh.

"Heaven be praised, she comes to," murmured Renée.

J. B. Frapillon saw that only too well, but he knew how to change his mode upon this reversal of his hopes, and, putting a good face on the matter, he boldly felt his first patient's pulse.

"Very low—some intermittence," he mumbled, imitating as best he could the manner of the faculty.

The sound of a strange voice finished the awakening of Madame de Muire from her long swoon. She opened her eyes and stared in stupefaction at the singular doctor who held her wrist. It was not because the business agent had not the mien of the position, for his spectacles, white neck-cloth, and serious and discreet face, would not have been unseemly on any physician. But great crises sometimes give nervous temperaments the gift of second sight, and the patient had, no doubt, read the true nature of Frapillon through the benignant mask of his honest and regular features, for she drew back her hand with a deeply marked movement of repulsion.

"Do you find yourself better, dear madame?" inquired the cashier, with the coaxing accent he knew so well to affect in cases where insinuation was his trump card.

"It's a doctor, my dear aunt," Renée hastened to say, "who has been good enough to come out of his way to give us help."

The intelligent girl had divined the impression felt by her second mother at sight of the pretended well-doer, and she sought to reassure her. But feelings are contagious, and she could not prevent a suspicion on her own part, even whilst presenting the impostor under the title he had bestowed upon himself.

"Thank you, my dear," Madame de Muire articulated painfully, "I feel better, and I hope it will amount to nothing."

"Do not fatigue yourself, madame," said Frapillon, seating himself with the easiness of a medical celebrity favouring a poor patient with a call; "the least exertion will be injurious to you, and your niece can inform me perfectly, without any need for you to speak."

"Sir," began Renée, with an alacrity which had a double motive; "I was here beside my aunt when I saw her suddenly turn pale and sink down in that chair. I sprang up, ran to her, her hands were icy cold, her eyes fixed—I called her without obtaining an answer, then I lost my self-control and—"

"Ran out in search of a physician whom chance—may I venture to say Providence—presented to you in my person," modestly interrupted the business-agent.

"I thank you once again, sir; but I entreat you to end my disquietude and tell me—"

"What I think of the lady's condition?" returned J. B. Frapillon; "I find it is as encouraging as possible. We have a simple syncope to deal with, and I have every reason to hope that, with care and rest, we shall not even have to have recourse to bleeding."

The cashier of the "Serpenteau" had excellent grounds for thus speaking, for however thoroughly he possessed the art of bleeding pocket-books, he was absolutely ignorant of the management of the lancet, and he would not have had the impudence to carry out his part to the operation, even had he had the necessary instrument.

"Nevertheless," he went on with marvellous coolness, "before I write out a prescription, I ought to know under what circumstances this nervous attack arose."

Renée raised her head and eyed him with restless attention.

"There was nothing, sir—I saw nothing which could cause—"

"No sharp emotion, no violent sorrow—"

"No," answered she, with some hesitation. "Nothing immediate, at all events," she added, lowering her voice.

"I put this question to you, mademoiselle," proceeded the suave J. B. Frapillon, "because as the mental state usually plays the greatest part in such crises, may be the cause will have to be looked for elsewhere, and I am obliged to ask you to excuse me again if I inquire—"

"What, what, sir?" interrogated Renée, seeing the speaker stop.

"Inquire in what hygienic condition was our dear patient? Has she undergone—how shall I express myself?—well, physical privations?"

Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier turned as red as a cherry, and her agitation increased when she noticed that the subject of the inquiry was suddenly overcome with a spasm.

"Mademoiselle," continued J. B. Frapillon, seeing she remained silent, "I entreat you to believe that I have not the slightest intention of offending you, nor even of intruding upon matters which do not concern the physician of the body; but here, the case requires imperatively that I should be informed, and—"

"My aunt has taken nothing to eat since yesterday," replied Renée, with the bluntness in which painful avowals are made.

"That suffices to explain her state of weakness, and now I know what treatment we must follow."

After this promise of medical relief, the impostor paused. He felt himself more and more master of the situation, and wished to make the most of his advantages for his better profit. The young lady cast down her eyes, and Madame de Muire had closed hers anew, as though wishful to remain a stranger to all that went on. The silence became embarrassing. It was broken by J. B. Frapillon, who deemed the moment come for a decisive stroke.

LIV

"PRAY listen to me, my dear child," said he, without heeding the start given by the proud descendant of the Saint-Seniers at this paternal expression. "I spoke just now of the competency of the healer for the body; mine goes, I hope, a little farther, and I have enough experience and devotion to heal suffering souls. Confide in me, and do not fear to tell me the truth. Do you believe that I did not see how things were?" he added, with an effusiveness which would have done credit to a leading comedian. "Alas! we live in times when all misfortunes are possible, and, before curing my patients, I have to assist them and protect them against the hardships of this dreadful siege."

This tirade was so artfully delivered that it triumphed over Renée's distrust.

"I thank you, sir," she said, tendering her hand to him, "I believe you, and I will tell you all."

Despite all his self-command, J. B. Frapillon had great trouble to dissemble

his joy on hearing Renée offer her secret. Still, he found the strength to assume on the instant the grave air of an honourable man about to receive a delicate confidence.

"Speak, mademoiselle," he said, in a lofty tone, "and be sure that you are entrusting your troubles to a friend."

In her uplifted orbs he fancied he could read a gleam of doubt.

"That is, if I am not a friend yet, I trust soon to become so," he hastened to add, on perceiving he had gone ahead too quickly.

"Sir," said Renée, rapidly making up her mind, "I am bound, before everything, to tell you the names of the patients to whom you so generously offer your skill and your advice—"

"Pardon me," interrupted the cashier, who meant not to appear eager, "but I wish above all to assure myself that our patient has no need of the skill which you much overrate."

This phrase was accompanied by a modest smile, which completely gained over Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier. She thanked him with a look, for his touching solicitude, and turned questioningly towards her still motionless aunt.

"Do not mind me, my child," said the latter, in a faint voice, "my strength is gradually coming back." Her eyes added, clearly, "You may speak to the gentleman."

The agent thrilled with pride on perceiving this fresh result of his diplomacy. His honied speech had caught both the poor women, and his machinations henceforward had a free scope.

"The healer of souls listens to you, mademoiselle," he said, with perfect grace.

"My aunt, who perchance will owe her life to you, is the Countess de Muire," began Renée, "the sister of my father, who was the Baron de Saint-Senier—"

"An orphan?" queried Frapillon, with the most tender interest.

"I can remember little of my father, and my mother lost her life in bringing me into the world," said she, in a voice fraught with feeling.

"Poor child!" sighed the cashier.

"From infancy my aunt has replaced the parents it was my misfortune to lose," resumed Renée. "She brought me up like her own daughter, and I have never left her."

"Noble hearts!" muttered the odious trickster, raising his eyes to heaven.

"Our family is entirely composed, or was composed of my brother, and a cousin, who also bore our name."

"Ah! they too?"

"The story of our mourning for them is what I am going to tell you," continued Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier in a firmer tone.

The hypocrite touched the goal, and he had nothing more to do than listen to learn all that he was interested in knowing, and yet he liked to refine cunning and meet difficulties. His foresight as a secret agent told him that under social usages one confidence of this degree calls for another, and that sooner or later he would have to proclaim his own name and address. He had a lie already at hand, and he was sharp enough not to hold it back till asked for.

"One moment, mademoiselle," he said, afraid of trying "my dear child" again; "I feel too proud of your confidence not to tell you at once to whom it is addressed. My story is short and simple," he added, smiling.

"I am Pierre Molinchart, residing at number 175 Boulevard Pigalle. I have been practising medicine over ten years in this very poor locality, and I have no other claim on your esteem than having striven to do a little good."

This declaration of civil status was uttered with a genialty which would have deceived an old judge, and the sham doctor risked nothing in bestowing on himself the name of a friend of his, a dubious practitioner whom Taupier called his right-hand man. Madame de Muire made an approving nod which signified :

"This is undoubtedly a well-bred man."

Renée bowed slightly ere resuming her narrative :

"In the summer-time we lived on our family estate in Burgundy, and in the winter at a mansion owned by my aunt in the Rue d'Anjou, here in Paris. My brother served in the navy, and rarely came to France. Would to heaven that duty had not called him home this year !"

Her voice broke, and Frapillon believed it advisable to interject : "Ah, I guess !—he has fallen a victim of this dreadful war !"

"You mistake, sir," continued the young lady, bitterly. "I had not the consolation of learning that my brother died for his country ; no, he was killed in a duel."

The business man, though knowing all about the subject, threw up his hands in painful astonishment.

"In a duel, or rather—"

Renée did not finish, the terrible word which Frapillon expected would not come to the lips struggling to utter them.

"That was a few days before the commencement of the siege," said the dead Saint-Senier's sister. "We were going to quit Maison-Laffite, where we had been spending two months, the last of a calm and happy life, when this grief befell us."

"Dreadful !" ejaculated the mock physician, passing his hand over his quite dry eyes.

"The very day when my brother was slain the Prussians arrived in the environs of Paris, and we had only time to come here for refuge."

"Alone ! without means ! without friends !"

"We had a relative," continued the young lady, with some hesitation, "my cousin who was at the same time my betrothed—"

Her hearer dropped his eyes discreetly, and redoubled his attention.

"At the close of winter my aunt had disposed of her mansion in the Rue d'Anjou ; our grief would have been out of place in a house in the lively quarters of this Paris whence all our class had fled, and we wished above all to lead a retired life. It was decided that we should come to dwell in this pavilion, long the property of our family and which was full of memories befitting our mourning."

The business-agent could not repress a start of curiosity ; he expected to learn something new, as the recital was entering on strange grounds.

"My father died here," she pursued in a hollow voice, "amid fatal circumstances which have been incessantly renewed in our family during half-a-century."

J. B. Frapillon held his breath in order not to lose a syllable. Renée had become very pale, and checked herself as though strength failed her to continue.

"But this cannot interest you, sir," she said at length, "and I must not trespass on your patience."

He began a protest.

"My cousin was an officer in our provincial garde-mobile," continued Renée, in a tone that cut all questions short; "he camped with his battalion at the gates of Paris, and his frequent visits were our sole consolation. One night, the outpost which he commanded was attacked, and he fell grievously wounded into the enemy's hands—"

"But he lives—you will see him again, of course!" exclaimed Frapillon, who knew how to put a quiver in his voice.

"He is dead," murmured the girl, forcing down her tears, "he died in hospital at Saint-Germain, cared for by hostile hands, without one devoted to him being there to close his eyes."

"How do you know this?"

This question escaped Taupier's prudent associate.

"The news came from the Prussian headquarters; our name is known in Germany, and those who slew him did us this kindness."

"Oh, this is dreadful!" moaned Frapillon, affected, though he would have paid handsomely for this precious intelligence.

"That is not all," went on Renée, bitterly, "and even then pity was not for us. We had two devoted persons here; a young girl, who had received my brother's last breath, and an old servant of our house."

"Well?"

"One night, the girl disappeared from this very house, into which some strange ruffians broke, and I have the certainty that she has perished their victim. This morning the faithful friend who still watched over us, went out, and has never returned—"

"But you are relating a horrible romance, my dear young lady," cried the business-agent.

"It is the mournful truth," returned Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, in a dying voice.

A deep silence ensued. Madame de Muire clasped her hands, and large tears flowed down her sunken cheeks. Frapillon was savouring his joy—the joy of a tiger who has seized upon his prey and is sharpening his claws to rend it."

"Poor ladies!" he said, slowly.

"Poor, indeed!" repeated Renée, with feverish energy. "But I promised to tell you all, and I shall keep my word."

Her voice had become sharp and dry, and her eyes sparkled.

"At the time when the siege confined us here, we were going down to Saint-Senier—my aunt had no time to receive her rents from her steward—two single women would not keep large sums of ready-money by them—three months have exhausted our feeble resources, and now—"

"Ah, mademoiselle," interrupted the pretended doctor, "I thank heaven for having placed me in your path. Come, come, young lady, a man may do what a young woman, and an ailing one, cannot even try. It is hardly possible that there's not one of your relatives at present in town, of whom I may ask—"

"Our poor Landreau tired himself out seeking for somebody who knows us—he found no one."

"But your family had a banker here, an account—"

"My cousin had no fortune, my brother was only here three days when—"

"But no papers of value, no shares, stocks, bonds?" queried the business-agent, wishful to be quite sure of holding his victims.

"Landreau went out to change our last bank-note. I handed it him myself—and he has disappeared."

"That's as well to know," thought Frapillon, and, raising his head, the infernal rogue sighed in feeling accents.

"My dear child, you will not surely now refuse to allow me the happiness of saving you?"

LV.

"SAVE us!" repeated Renée, shaking her head doubtfully.

"Have you confidence in me?" inquired Frapillon, who meant to profit at once by the advantage he had gained.

"Why should I not, after all the interest you have shown in us?" retorted the young lady rather evasively.

"Then be good enough to listen. In the first place, it must be fully understood that the want of money should not worry you for another moment. I have the honour to inform you that I am comfortably situated and—"

"Pardon me, sir," said Renée whose pride revived at this direct overture. "I thank you for your kind intention, but I beg you not to persist. Whatever our straits, we cannot accept charity."

"Who spoke of any such thing, mademoiselle?" exclaimed the business man, with a kind of grave bluntness. "A bearer of a name and fortune like yours can find as much money as she wants."

"We have proof at present to the contrary, and so long as there is no communication open with the country—"

"Such obstacles are only trifles, and your Landreau could not have been really sharp. That you may know nobody here, I allow, but your château and lands in Burgundy are known."

"How so, sir?" asked the astonished young lady.

"Anyone can see that you do not understand business matters," returned Frapillon with a smile. "Learn then, my child, that there is no banker who would not think himself happy to lend you whatever amount you needed till the end of the siege, and even more, on the simple attestation of your identity."

"I never thought of that," remarked Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, after an instant's reflection, "and besides, who can recommend us to a banker, since our friends are away?"

"But I, mademoiselle, Dr. Molinhard, I possess enough notoriety, thank heaven, for my bearing witness to be deemed sufficient."

Renée turned towards Madame de Muire as though to consult her.

"And I am altogether sure that your aunt sees nothing bemeaning in this," concluded the wily J. B. Frapillon.

The ailing woman, who had gradually recovered strength, followed the dialogue with marked attention, but so far had contented herself by approving her niece's refusal with a look. At this direct interpellation, she started as if the necessity of her speaking was painful to her. And, indeed, the feeling agitating her at this time placed her in the greatest perturbation. Brought up in a family whose wealth was hereditary during ages and wherein the traditions of the ancient court were perpetuated notwithstanding revolutions, the countess's habit was to completely hand over the care of her fortune to a steward. She signed leases when

indispensable, and for the rest relied on this man who received the income, laid out the capital, and managed the property. The peasants on the Saint-Senier estate knew her solely by her benevolence, for she only entered their dwellings to succour the afflicted and never intervened in their affairs but to kindly remit arrears after a bad harvest. It resulted from this manner of living, borrowed from another age and very seldom practised by wealthy landowners in France, that Madame de Muire was as much a novice as her niece so far as regarded her material interests. In her eyes a notary was always a scrivener whose duty was to scribble deeds for men of quality to sign without any need to read them, and bankers were mere tradesmen with whom the nobility should not mingle. She would have freely styled the chief magistrate of her township "Mr. Bailie," but the idea would never have come to her of bringing a monetary dispute before a tribunal.

In all things, the countess was a hundred years behind modern opinions, and it is not surprising that she remained perplexed at a stranger's offer of assistance. J. B. Frapillon, despite, or because perhaps of his easy manners, inspired her with but scant confidence and not the least sympathy. On the other hand, the prospect of a distress that was becoming poverty alarmed her much more for Renée than for herself, and the sham doctor's proposition opened an unexpected outlet. But whatever her ignorance of business, Madame de Muire was too keen not to understand that the facilities offered by this deliverer dropped from the clouds only existed on condition of engaging the responsibility of this enigmatical character. She also knew too well the way of the world not to be unaware that as a rule none oblige others without some hidden reason, and she felt all the danger in incurring a debt of gratitude at hazard.

"Sir," she said, after a long silence, which J. B. Frapillon attributed to her illness, "I am in the highest degree grateful for your obliging offer, and I should not hesitate to accept it if I could believe that your simple recommendation to a banker would be sufficient."

"A written recommendation of mine, needless to state," corrected the business agent, who wished to establish his claim on the ladies' gratitude.

"That is what I thought," went on the old lady, gently, "and that is precisely why I cannot receive such a service from a person whom I see this evening for the first time."

"It would still be a deed of charity," added the proud young lady.

The agent bit his lip. His cunning as a plotter did not go so far as to foresee such delicacy, never met with among his clients of the Rue Cadet, and the refusal upset all his devices. To fetter the tenants of the pavilion by the strongest of all bonds, money, was the plan which the keen Frapillon had settled in his shady financier's brain.

"But there's no kindness about it even, since you pay for the use of it," he protested, with unfeigned stupefaction.

The argument had no effect upon the countess, who knew nothing about banking, but who saw very clearly into matters of behaviour.

"Oh, don't be alarmed, I would not take you to Rothschild," the mock doctor resumed, almost roughly. "I have a friend in the business, who lives only a short distance from here. I need only speak a word to him and you will receive your money in a couple of hours."

Needless to say that the friend in question was no other than J. B. Frapillon himself, who intended to draw out of his own cash-box the funds destined to enchain his dupes. His desire to control them through their gratitude

had grown, and since he had found himself in company with the charming heiress of the Saint-Seniers, all sorts of extravagant notions had been through his head. Stories were remembered of the Great Revolution when the rabble saved noble girls and wedded them afterwards. Hence he saw his prey escaping him by an unforeseen refusal with a disappointment akin to anger.

"Well, I will just step out," he said, half rising from his seat. "I will return with a thousand francs to meet your most pressing needs, and we can arrange matters afterwards by a note which you alone will sign."

This time he reckoned he had hit the mark.

"That would be tantamount to accepting the money from you direct, sir, and you ought to understand it is impossible," said Renée with a cold dignity cutting all persistence short.

J. B. Frapillon wished to the devil all these scruples of the rustic dames so foolish as to prefer poverty to anybody's money, and he began to despair of bringing them round.

"But, my dear young lady, what will become of you?" he asked with the contrite air of one pitying an inevitable misfortune, "what will become of Madame la Comtesse, habituated as you are to comfort and luxury?"

"I shall work," said the younger noblewoman calmly.

"You work! poor child! you do not know that even in ordinary times no woman can earn a livelihood in Paris, and that, since the siege, it is a hundred times more difficult?"

"There is help—food is distributed—I am not ashamed of my poverty—I will go myself and claim—"

"You will obtain nothing, having neither relatives nor legal abode in this quarter. As a case in point, I wager you have not even your card to enable you to buy bread."

J. B. Frapillon bet on a sure thing and struck home.

"That is true," said Renée, sadly drooping her head.

"At last," thought the perfidious agent who had an idea.

Madame de Muire had become very pale, and it looked as if she would go off into a swoon again.

"Listen to me, mademoiselle," said the business man with a seriousness tempered with benevolence, "I understand your refusal and I honour it, but you cannot mean to carry it to cruelty, which it would be to leave your aunt exposed to privations in her present state. I declare to you plainly that my duty as a physician, obliges me to order her removal to a hospital."

His hearer could not conceal the nervous shock given her.

"Fear nothing," proceeded Frapillon; "I have another matter to propose to you and I rely upon your good sense and good heart not to refuse it."

Renée looked at him with uneasy attention.

"Besides my ordinary business," went on the pretended Esculapius, "I keep a private hospital where I receive patients as boarders and lodgers. Oh, do not alarm yourself! this is not gratuitous—charges are made, and rather high ones, too, in order to confine my boarders to the upper classes. You will not have either my money or my name or my recommendation to a friend—be it so! but I do not see what prevents you entering an establishment where you will have the bill presented on the day of your departure. Hang it all! you may certainly accept from me the credit you would receive from an inn at Dieppe or Vichy, if you went to the seaside or a watering-place."

This time, Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier's face showed a vivid emotion which Madame de Muire seemed to share. The tempter was awaiting a reply. He had only partly lied, for the private hospital he offered was one under the management of his *alter ego* Dr. Molinchart, whose name he had taken and whose functions he intended to usurp.

"What is that noise?" asked Renée all of a sudden.

LVI.

FRAPILLON listened. Repeated blows shook the little door in the wall of the Rue de Laval, and in the night silence, the hammering had a formidable intensity. One might have believed that the wall was being breached.

"Were you expecting anybody?" inquired the business-agent, much vexed by the unforeseen diversion.

"No one," muttered Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, who seemed greatly frightened.

"Then it is somebody who has mistaken the number or the practical joke of a runaway blackguard."

Renée shook her head and said sadly, "I do not think that."

"Lately," added Madame de Muire, "our house has become the object of malevolent curiosity to the neighbours."

"Why so?" inquired Frapillon, with a simple air, for he wanted to be fully informed.

"Our seclusion has given grounds for the most absurd suppositions."

"Not a day passed," proceeded Renée, "but our poor Landreau had to answer questions respecting us; I even fear that his disappearance is connected with some tumult of this kind."

"The noise increases," observed the sham physician.

True enough, the bangs, as regular at first as volley firing, became confounded into a continuous thundering. It was evident that several persons were pounding at once with various instruments, and it appeared impossible that the postern would not give way under the combined efforts of the mob. Frapillon did not well know what course to take. This outbreak which he would have incited the night before, disarranged all his plans now that he had succeeded in penetrating the place. He was not far from believing it the attack of a mob, and the prospect of the general public meddling with his private speculations did not please him. After due consideration, he judged it better to go and meet the storming-party than await the violence of an enraged crowd.

"Will you allow me, ladies, to go and see what it is?" he asked, rising.

Without giving them time to answer, he went out and strode up the lime-tree avenue. The uproar had not ceased, and he could even distinguish wrangling voices in the street. He had his speech cut and dried, and did not hesitate to open the door. But as soon as he did so, the whole hinged side gave way under a vigorous shove from without, and before the obliging cashier could oppose it, it was wrenched off and a dozen persons rushed through.

"What is your will, citizens?" challenged J. B. Frapillon, with much coolness.

The citizens whom he addressed were intermingled with many citizenesses, and in the foremost ranks pressed forward the trio of amiable ladies who had enlivened the "Dead Rat" so agreeably. M^{me} Irma seemed to have

taken the command of the troop, for she had been first to enter with the bearing of a drum-major, and it was she who was spokeswoman.

"We want to go over this house," she said, with an authoritative accent which an Inquisitor-General would not have disowned.

"And by what right do you force your way into a private dwelling?" demanded the diplomatist of the Rue Cadet, who never feared to invoke the law when it suited his interest.

"In the name of the people," majestically responded the matron.

"Ay, ay," shouted all the war party.

"Still you must make known who or what you are searching for," went on Frapillon, albeit quite certain on this head.

"Signals are made from this roof every night," rejoined a young fellow, who was rather over-excited from having made too long a stay at a wine-shop ere joining the little army.

"There are two aristocrats of women in here who are Prussian spies," added the terrible Phémie.

During this colloquy, Frapillon, who had only started it to gain time, studied the motley gathering and sought for a fulcrum. At the outset he had beheld with lively pleasure that no representative of authority directed the enterprise, as he might have feared after the threats of accusation from the customers of the "Dead Rat." Probably there had been no time for M^{me} Irma to have been after the police-inspector, and she had believed it her duty to improvise this amateur manifestation. Whetted in appetite by their arrest of the luckless Pilevert, the mob had needed no exhortations to pass on to other amusements, so that the lady had no trouble in drumming up recruits. They were not extremely numerous, for the advanced hour had discouraged many of the amateur house-to-house visitors who swarmed during the siege. Three women, half-a-dozen boys, seven or eight working men, and a few belated lower middle-class persons composed the whole storming party. It was among the last that Frapillon hoped to find some kindly assistant, and he was scanning his nearest bystander openly, with his very clear-sighted eyes, when he felt his elbow slightly nudged. On turning, he perceived behind him the pasty face of one he had not remarked in the hubbub of the assault. Chance had arranged this beautifully, and the business man was treated as well as he could wish. The individual who had touched him so delicately was no other than the doctor whose personality he had adopted at random, the real Molinhard, whom he had reckoned on using for his ulterior projects.

This not at all famous member of the faculty was a tall, thin man of forty, adorned with long, flat locks which piteously fell on the collar of a greenish gaberdine, and a wan visage which seemed to have been squeezed between two doors, so pronounced a hatchet look it had. His mien contained so much of the simpleton that one immediately thought of Thomas Diafoirus, and there was exhaled from him the odour of a polecat. A Dead Sea Fruit of science, though regularly certificated, Molinhard had followed from youth upwards the rather sterile paths of demagogy and, as he was not strong enough to cleave his way alone—hatchet-head to the contrary—he had early fallen into the wake of the skilful and audacious Frapillon. The rueful doctor was one of the numerous pawns whom the Rue Cadet player moved on his diplomatic board. On a word or sign from his leader, Molinhard walked like an automaton figure, and the other took good care not to lose so fine an occasion to utilize his blind devotion. The reply to the nudge was a lordly glance, in which the obedient leech clearly read

the order to keep quiet and passively approve. Sure now of the concurrence of his slave, J. B. Frapillon applied himself with a light heart to the defence of his wards.

"You are in error, citizeness," he said politely to the irascible Phémie ; "the persons living here are sound patriots, and the one excellent reason for their not sitting up at night to make signals is, that they are both unwell."

"Rubbish ! don't try to 'take us in,' " cried the virulent Irma, "there's one who goes scampering about the streets at all hours of day and night."

"She forgot her own ailment in order to find me and bring me to her almost dying aunt, for I have the honour to be a physician," concluded Frapillon, with a dignity which did not miss its effect.

The medical profession generally enjoys the privilege of imposing respect upon the masses, civilized or not, and the rioters of all countries submit to its ascendancy as well as savages.

"Well, it will wash, what the gentleman is saying," grunted the compassionate Aglæ.

"All that's very well, but you'll have to prove it," said M'ame Irma, who did not accept pretty words for current cash.

"Yes, certainly," added Phémie.

"Let's go through the crib !" cried a workman.

"Citizens," replied Frapillon, "I have the utmost respect for the patriotic intentions animating you ; but I should fail in all the duties of my profession if I were to allow a noisy visit which might kill one of my patients."

The majority uttered an approving murmur, whereupon the agent, encouraged by this budding sympathy, continued :

"Therefore, I move that three among you shall accompany me to my patients. For instance, this gentleman—" he indicated his liege man Molinard—"this lady"—he chose the soft-hearted Aglæ—"and, moreover, any one who likes to volunteer. If I have told you the truth, I hope you will do me the favour of going away without further noise."

"All right !" shouted the assaulting party in one voice.

The two selected representatives stepped out beside the sham doctor, and one of the most determined partisans of the search principle joined himself voluntarily to the pair.

"I only ask five minutes, citizens, and I enjoin silence whilst you await my return. Be calm, for the sake of humanity," said Frapillon, so well aware that big words never fail to impose on the rabble. They conformed without remonstrance to the injunction, and the little deputation went on towards the pavilion. Visibly flattered by the preference, Aglæ took the lead of the quartette, followed by the volunteer delegate. Molinard and Frapillon closed up the rear.

"Repeat whatever I say and stand up for me at a pinch," whispered the latter to his myrmidon.

"Be easy," replied the other in the same tone, "I guessed that there were politics under the surface."

"On the service of the Society !" breathed Frapillon, solemnly.

LVII.

ON reaching the house door, Frapillon halted the party.

"Do you not think, lady and gentlemen," he said, returning as quickly as possible to his courteous language, "that our too abrupt entrance would terrify the ladies?"

In regard to concessions, it is only the first step it is hard to induce mobs to take, and since the deputation was disconnected from the bulk of the invaders, it asked nothing more than to give in readily.

"Why, of course, citizen," said the workman; "respect for the softer sex, that's my motto, and the first man who kicks against it will have to deal with me."

Molinchard had no wish to do so, regulating his movements by the eye of his chief, who did not spare him visual telegrams. As for the sensitive Aglæ, her tender heart throbbed at the bare idea of seeing again the innocent and persecuted heroine who had asked her the way to a baker's. This pupil of M^{ame} Irma's read many novels, and Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier appeared to her in poetic garb.

"If you will allow me," went on Frapillon, "I would like to go in alone to my patients, and prepare them before I return to introduce you."

"Go ahead, citizen, go on," the delegate of the people hastened to say, "and our little mother here will keep me company."

Aglæ curtsied with a gracious smile.

"But, now I think of it," said the cashier, taking the ball on the bound, "perhaps it would be better to break the ladies in gradually to this advent of company. This gentleman may kindly follow me," he added, denoting Molinchard.

Without waiting for objections, which, however, he was pretty sure not to receive, he proceeded to the parlour. The flat-haired doctor obeyed the hint with mathematical precision, and put his long legs in motion to escort his political master. The door had been left ajar at the end of the passage, and the latter had merely to push it gently to make his entrance, followed by his timid acolyte. The saddening scene was nowise changed since he had left it. Madame de Muire was still pale and motionless in her easy-chair. Renée held one of her hands in both hers, and questioned her with her gaze. During the absence of their pretended befriender, they must have exchanged sorrowful confidences, for traces of recent tears yet appeared on their cheeks. There was nothing hostile in the astonishment depicted upon the ladies' countenances on perceiving the quaint form of Molinchard. Indeed, the poor doctor was not one of those who terrify when they show their faces. Though capable of a multitude of misdeeds, this pitiable personage wore a benignant air, which, at first sight, might easily deceive anybody. He bowed awkwardly, and preserved the modest attitude of a novice whom a more experienced friend was introducing into society.

"We were wrong to be affrighted, my dear ladies," said Frapillon, off-handedly "but still the young lady was not mistaken; it was a malevolent knocking at the door."

"What have we done to them, in heavens' name?"

"Nothing, assuredly; but the masses never reason and mistrust everything not simply understood."

"Pray, explain yourself, sir," said Madame de Muire, uneasily.

"First allow me to present to you the man by means of whom I was able to quiet those mad fellows."

Molinchard assumed a lofty bearing, which he believed perfectly appropriate to the circumstances.

"The gentleman is a friend whom the happiest chance brought along the street at the moment the crowd collected, and, thanks to his intervention, supplementing my own, I have obtained a respite."

"What! are those ruffians still there?" cried the young lady, alarmed.

Frapillon nodded assent.

"And what do they want?" haughtily demanded Renéc.

"Merely to search this house from top to bottom."

"Impossible!" said Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, rising in agitation.

"Calm yourself, my dear child," soothingly returned Frapillon, struck by the effect of this announcement of a domiciliary inspection upon his "patient."

"I repeat that is impossible, sir," said the young lady. "Private life ought to be respected. Though I am but a woman, I give you my word for it that I shall oppose any such odious violation of the law."

"There must be a secret hidden here," thought the agent, but all he said aloud was: "We live in times when the laws are little respected, and under the pretext this rabble invokes, any house may be invaded, though thrice sacred."

"Pray, what crime are we accused of?" disdainfully inquired Renée.

"Of—of—I beg your pardon for mentioning such an absurdity—of signalling to the enemy."

"Signalling!" said the young hearer in stupefaction, for she had never had the opportunity of plumbing the depth of Parisian stupidity.

"Yes, indeed," returned Frapillon, shrugging his shoulders, "it is asserted that after eight p.m. a light flashes out on the top floor of this pavilion."

The young lady visibly turned pale, and her aunt's emaciated countenance reflected much emotion. These tokens did not escape the cashier's attentive eye, and he meant to keep playing on the chord which he had set vibrating.

"It is furthermore asserted that this light is of a strange colour, green or blue, I don't know which, and—"

"Oh, this is disgraceful," ejaculated Renée, quite overwhelmed. "These people must be as stupid as ferocious."

"Alas! young lady, you have only too well read their nature, and I have seen great evils wrought by popular ignorance upon more frivolous foundations still than this."

After this far from encouraging sentence, Frapillon made a pause to enjoy his stroke. In seeking to terrify the two poor ladies he had succeeded beyond his desires, for they seemed in undeniable consternation. This was truly the time to deliver a grand blow to attain his aim; but before he had uttered a word, Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier stopped, facing him, and declared with extraordinary resolution:

"This house where my father died is a holy place, and none shall profane it whilst I live."

"Good again," concluded the visitor, mentally; "sure enough there is something beneath this, and I have brought the pretty dear round to the point I intended."

"No; they shall not come in!" reiterated the girl, pacing the room unsteadily.

"You have not let me finish, mademoiselle," resumed he, softly; "and I hasten to tell you that for this evening at any rate, I believe the danger can be conjured away in return for a little concession which I will at once make clear—though, still—I cannot guarantee the future. What happens to-day may occur again to-morrow, and so long as you dwell in this house the most simple acts of your daily life may occasion a disaster."

"But what are we to do? what will become of us?"

"Follow my advice."

"Your advice?"

"Why, yes, quit this place, not to-morrow, but this very night, and go with your aunt to live in my private asylum, where, I promise you, nobody will come after you."

If Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier could have divined the double meaning in this piece of advice, she would have been less eager to answer. But she was under the influence of such an emotion that she had lost all faculty of reflecting. Besides, Madame de Muire appeared struck by the advantages of the proposition, for she approved her niece with a nod and a look when she replied to the pretended doctor:

"Very well, be it so. I believe you incapable, sir, of abusing the confidences of two women who have not a protector in all the world, and we will follow you on one condition."

"It is accepted beforehand."

"It is that I may come here as often as I like, and do so alone."

"Nothing more simple. My house is in the neighbourhood; you will take your keys away with you this evening, and pay all the visits here you like. Pray, believe, dear young lady, that I have no intention of merely changing your seclusion," he added, smiling.

"But how are we going to get clear of this mischievous mob?" queried Renée, who, like all impulsive characters, always started off straight when once she came to a resolution.

"Allow me to manage that," said Frapillon. "Dear friend," said he, addressing Molinchart, who had been playing dummy so far, "be obliging enough to introduce here the two persons waiting under the porch."

The real doctor obeyed with the passive punctiliousness of an oriental mute.

"The delegates whom I am obliged to present to you," proceeded the business-agent, "do not belong to the upper classes, but I beg of you a little indulgence, and I assure you that the reception will not take long."

He had barely finished this oratorical palliative before Molinchart reappeared, urging before him the deputy in the blouse and the sentimental Aglaë. Frapillon, who possessed a knowledge of the human heart and particularly of average natures, had not promised too much in saying the interview would not last long. The representatives of the great unwashed could not have shown themselves more sensitive than they did at the touching sight of the two lone women whose pallid features bore the marks of profound woe. The man stopped on the threshold, twiddling his fingers in his cap, and the youthful Aglaë wiped her eyes without any wish to go in at all.

"You see, my friends, that I have not deceived you, and that these poor ladies are quite harmless," said Frapillon. "Let us go and assure your

comrades that the widow and orphan of a soldier fallen for his country are not our enemies."

In taking the head of the quartette, which hastened to beat a retreat, he found an opportunity to whisper to Molinchard.

"Get away with the crowd, and come back with a cab in half-an-hour to take me up at the door."

LVIII.

DR. MOLINCHARD'S private hospital in no way resembled the magnificent establishments of the same character imposingly constructed upon the rising ground of Passy and Auteuil. It was a long building on the slope of the Buttes-Montmartre overlooking the Plaine Saint-Denis, and a series of yards surrounded by whitewashed walls, under control of the democratic physician. It had originally been a factory, and Molinchard had hastened to take it on low terms after the failure of the manufacturer. Having worn out his illusions as to fortune and glory, the practitioner had left the Quartier des Ecoles a year since, where it did not appear to him that a sufficient income was afforded by visits of three francs and consultations at forty sous. Weary of lavishing attentions so scurvily recompensed upon the youth of both sexes haunting the learned district, he made up his mind one day to take a bold new departure. Shaking the dust off his shoes in the smoky den where he dwelt at the top of the Rue Saint-Jacques, he bade adieu, though not without regret, to the drinking resorts of the Boulevard Saint-Michel, to transport his learning and penates into more productive regions.

But at the same time, he had turned his views on the practical side of his art. Long, long had the green and red placards of his confrères who advertised, murdered his sleep, and what he dreamed of was the traffic in trade-medicines. In his insomnia, maintained by the abuse of beer and tobacco, he had more than once caught a glimpse of the splendid consultation parlour where he hoped to distribute gratuitous advice—the remedies to be made up in his own dispensary at high prices. He aspired to sit in a handsome mahogany easy-chair in a striped dressing-gown, and in view of such grandeur he had even composed several infallible pomades. But to realise these brilliant hopes, a capital was lacking, and the unfortunate doctor had to abate his pretensions considerably. Upon the hint of his friend Frapillon, whom he revered as a master, he had resigned himself to working a less fruitful vein upon more modest funds. The oracle of the Rue Cadet had declared that a private asylum was a want long felt in the poor northern parts of Paris near the fortifications. The errant seeker of fortune at any price took good care to raise no objections, especially when the business-agent offered to supply the preliminary expenses. The latter, who knew very well what he was about in risking this outlay, had been looking up a suitable site, and he installed Molinchard there on a meet footing.

The new temple of health marvellously capped the series of subsidiary establishments that J. B. Frapillon deemed it indispensable to annex to his lair. The roadside inn kept by Mouchabeuf at Rueil, under his occult patronage, was of solid utility for extra-moral operations, as poor Régine already had learnt to her cost; but it was situated much too far for current doings and, besides, there were some necessities which it did not meet.

To put away a lunatic or a young woman who did not wish her parents to discover her condition—these fell within the speciality of a secret agency; and yet the confidential inquiry agent had no one to undertake these delicate tasks until he confided them to his lieutenant. Molinhard accepted the post with enthusiasm, and acquitted himself as well as could be wished of his delicate functions, finding his profit in so doing from every point of view.

In the first place, J. B. Frapillon generously let him have half the official profits, which ran up to a presentable figure, and, moreover, the doctor cultivated a little notoriety in the popular quarters. The honour of being a deputy for Paris appeared already in prospect, this brilliant future tempted the Poor Man's Doctor—as he self-styled himself. Since the Revolution that crushed out the Empire, his importance had naturally grown, and the siege had come opportunely to increase his stock of glory and patients. Notwithstanding so much prosperity, the private hospital continued in anything but a luxurious state. The imposition of siege-time rations had reduced the menu to the most economical scale, and the sleeping accommodation and furniture had never sinned on the side of comfort. A great dormitory for the men, and half-a-dozen bed-rooms for the weaker sex, all supplied with iron bedsteads, straw-bottomed chairs, and deal tables, occupied the first floor of a long barracks, pierced with narrow windows carefully grated. The basement comprised the kitchen, not overburdened with pots and pans, the dispensary wherein dried various herbs gathered in the near-at-hand chalky wastes, and the manager's own apartments. A regimental *cantinière*, honourably discharged after long Algerian service, and more versed in pouring drink into herself than physic into patients, attended to the lady boarders. The men were served by a factotum who had been a chemist's boy, a National Guard drummer and a cook by turns, and he found all these crafts useful in this establishment.

The three court-yards resembled the exercise-grounds of prisons. Sprinkled with the powdered plaster of Paris abounding around the site, and deprived of any sort of verdure, those Elysian Fields did not even afford the invalids a pleasant view from being shut in by ragged walls roof-eaves high—an arrangement which had much contributed in determining J. B. Frapillon's choice of his locality as distasteful in itself as fully appropriate for his designs. Built beneath the deserted height formerly crowned by the famous La Galette Mill, the once popular resort of Sunday pleasure-seekers, it was completely sheltered from prying eyes, and, beyond that, offered the invaluable advantage of having as many doors as one could wish for clandestine use. The ostensible entrance faced the north-west, and was reached by lonely roads leading to the Porte Saint-Ouen; but the wall, backed by the muddy hillocks above Montmartre Cemetery, was pierced with two or three low posterns, of which Molinhard always carried about the keys with him. However, the patients never grumbled at the isolation to which the position of the buildings condemned them. The majority had reasons enough to appreciate their *incognito*, and the ladies in particular, almost to a woman, took great care not to cross the threshold of their rooms, where the ex-cantinière took them a frugal meal twice a-day. As for the ruder sex, the square yard where they could play at various games sufficed for their happiness.

But the advantages of this model asylum were not limited to this, and the edifice selected by the sharp-witted agent would have been incomplete, had it not included a retreat still better fitted for extraordinary requirements of his mysterious craft. He had foreseen the event of

having to lodge and also to keep immured, more important boarders than militia skulks feigning illness to avoid war risks, and over-amorous servants who formed the bulk of the doctor's patrons. At the end of the large buildings, where vulgar sufferers were boxed up, rose the tiled roof of a small separate house intended of old for the manufacturer's own dwelling. A lowly structure of one storey and one little suite of rooms, yet complete and fit to receive two persons. There were two sleeping-rooms, a sitting-room, and a dining-room, simply yet tolerably well-furnished, and the windows looked out on a little yard, where an attempt had been made to sow grass seeds. This meagre lawn, adorned with straggling rose bushes, somewhat enlivened the view, which was further regaled by the dry branches of *elematis* scrambling up the back wall. This pretence of a garden had a door opening on to the waste land, and inside the lodging another door communicated with the main building.

It was here, in this secret nook of a mysterious abode, as difficult to find in great Paris as the dungeons of an old castle buried in a forest, that the evilly disposed Frapillon had led Madame de Muire and her niece. Brought hither on a dark night, in a cab Molinehard had procured after the rabble had dispersed, the poor ladies had not even seen the way they came. They had so utterly lost the sense of reality from the numerous emotions of that fatal evening, that they were not uneasy about the consequences of this abruptly taken step. Besides, there was nothing alarming about the details of their transfer. J. B. Frapillon had superintended it, and, after having presented to his wards the doctor who was charged to represent him in every way, he took leave, promising to call on the morrow.

After scarcely touching a supper served by the *ex-cantinière*, aunt and niece had gone to rest without strength even to exchange their impressions, they were so exhausted with weariness. Daylight had long come, next day, before Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier awoke no little astonished to see new objects around her. Memory returned promptly, and, respecting her aunt's repose, she dressed with the intention of going out early to the pavilion. Their evening's departure had been so hasty, that a run round to the Rue de Laval was indispensable to get a number of necessary articles for their new existence, to say nothing of special reasons for her visit. Renée was at first astonished to see nobody about, and she went out into the garden in hopes of meeting some servant. Everywhere she found the most utter solitude, and she gazed with uneasy surprise at the high walls surrounding her on every side. She called many times for the woman who had waited on them the night before, and whose name she had happened to remember. The echo of the high walls alone answered her.

LIX.

RENÉE imagined that her call had not been heard, and that, perhaps, the domestic needs of the establishment kept all the staff in another part. Besides, the hour was early enough to explain the complete loneliness in which the new comers were left. Hence, she resigned herself without too much difficulty to awaiting the doctor's visit, or the coming of an assistant, and meanwhile strolled about the limited recreation-ground granted to the privileged lodgers in the extra wing. This did not take her long. The walls limited the promenade to a dozen paces either way, as the space affected the form of a perfect square. She was struck by the signs of neglect

reigning over this patch. The sward seemed never to be watered or mown; the withered rose-hushes bordering it were split through dry-rot, and the yellow leaves had formed a litter to hide the gravel paths. It was clear that a gardener's hand had never come this way, and that vegetation soon wilted here. The return of spring could not restore life to these poor forgotten plants, and at least the snowy mantle cast by winter over this mournful play-ground served to veil the misery of nature unadorned.

Renée loved verdure and flowers; she was interested in all God's creations, and, from her infancy, passed away from towns, she had learnt to read in the mysterious book held up by field and forest to dwellers about them. The sight of this abandoned garden shocked her; she suffered by the want of care, as she would have done to see a sick friend slowly dying for lack of affectionate attention. This early disenchantment gave birth to fresh ideas in her. Looking around she found the walls very high, and the window-bars very thick. This building, which she was given to understand was an asylum for the sick, much resembled a prison. Air, sunlight, and room, so dear to convalescents, were scarce in this restricted court, and the parody of culture attempted here, only added a regret the more to the sad impressions its aspect excited.

Renée felt stifled, and fancied her shoulders felt the weight of the plaster-set stones "slashed" together according to the graceless rules of suburban architecture. This succession of sheds vulgarly run up by some "jerry-builder" to cover boilers or machinery, appeared to her an ugly, gloomy thing, almost menacing. To escape this painful sensation, she hurried back into the room she had quitted. At least there was some comfort to make her forget outside dreariness for a moment.

Madame de Muirc still slumbered and Renée could examine, better than on the previous evening, the little parlour and dining-room forming the principal apartments of their new abode. The furniture was next to new, and the wall-paper fairly fresh. At first blush, the place had the semblance of a respectable home, but on a closer look, one could find very visible marks of the abandonment which was the serpent's trail distinctive of this displeasing hermitage. A thick layer of dust covered the sideboard and armchairs, the window panes had become opaque in default of adequate cleaning, and the ugly bronze gilt clock masked by a fly-specked shade seemed never to have gone. Two logs, possibly remaining from last winter, crossed one another in the hearth ashes like the pirate's emblem, and it chilled one to see this paltry fireless chimney-place. In the dining-room the dishes of their scanty evening's meal remained on the table, and the view of these not at all appetising fragments did not contribute a little to augment the repugnance felt by the young lady, in spite of her resignation. That luxury, of which she had never known the want or value, had formed an integral part of her existence without her suspecting it, and this negligence, carried to the extreme of uncleanness, revolted her dainty nerves.

But more serious misgivings began to assume the upperhand. Renée remarked that the only door communicating with the principal building was fastened with an enormous lock with the key on the other side. Thus it was evident that the inmates of the detached house stood in the impossibility of going forth without the director's permission. They would have to wait till it pleased his underlings to draw the solid bolt that fastened the door, and Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, with good reason, wondered that patients should thus be left at the whim of a nurse. Vainly she sought a hell pull or an electric knob till, irritated by her much

too prolonged loneliness, she began hammering on the door with a child's anger. It proved a no more happy appeal than the outcries wasted on the empty air of the yard. She uselessly bruised her delicate knuckles and soon had to give up such unprofitable efforts. She retraced her steps, making very sad reflections on the imprudence which had conducted her into this strange house, and mechanically directing herself towards the garden. At the very moment of her setting foot therein, she could not restrain a start of surprise, for the "Doctor" was there, the man at least whom she took for the director of the establishment, we mean, J. B. Frapillon himself.

Calm, refreshed-looking and smirking, the mock doctor doffed his hat and saluted his patient with all the gracefulness acquired in the exercise of his multiple professions. How had he entered the yard, so surely untenanted a while ago and so loftily walled in on all sides? This was Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier's first thought, and in the rapid glance around accompanying it, she remarked the trellis vibrating near a very low wicket door in the wall, hitherto unperceived. This skilfully dissembled inlet was the only one the garden enjoyed. Therefore the doctor came, not from the Temple of Health supposedly directed by him, but from without—a fresh peculiarity that struck Renée particularly.

"Allow me, mademoiselle," he said in an obsequious tone, belied by the ironical expression of his look, "allow me to felicitate you on the good colour you have; I see that repose and the exceptional air we breathe here have already had good effect."

A scornful glance rewarded this compliment, of which the stilted form badly disguised the mocking intent.

"I beg you, sir, in the first place, tell me whither you have brought me?" she said curtly.

Frapillon, finding himself unmasked at the first thrust, only the better feigned astonishment.

"Why, dear young lady, you know that as well as I myself: you are in Montmartre, in my private asylum, the Villa des Buttes, where, I venture to say, you will receive all the attentions that comport with your state."

Renée was about to discuss this expression, of which the ambiguity instinctively startled her, but she preferred to go straight to the mark.

"You are not answering my question, sir," she observed with cold firmness; "it may be that I have imperfectly expressed myself, but I wished to learn how one enters and leaves this place?"

"Goodness, gracious! that's plain enough! by the door, of course," Frapillon impudently rejoined.

"A truce to pleasantry, sir. Last evening, in my trouble, I accepted a proposal which I should have more closely studied, but now I wish to resume my freedom."

"And who thinks of entrenching upon it?" exclaimed the hypocrite, clasping his hands.

"You cannot surely expect to persuade me that such walls and bars are the usual ornaments of a private sanatorium?"

"Why not, dear young lady? Some patients are very excitable, and for their own sake—"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, with a nervous shiver, for she feared that she understood it only too well.

"Nothing concerning you, assuredly," replied Frapillon, unmovedly.

"In short, sir, you cannot deny that we are prisoners here. I have been up this hour and called without anyone coming; and on looking for a door, the only one I found was carefully locked. You must own that I have grounds for complaint, and for demanding an explanation of you as to these strange surroundings."

"I am sorry, dear young lady, that our only woman-servant should keep you waiting, but we have so many boarders at the present moment, that—"

"That is not the question, sir; show me how I am to leave this place!"

"Why should you want to go out?" queried the mock doctor after a silence.

"Do you ask me that?" cried Renée, passionately; "have you already forgotten that I consented to go with you on condition that I might go every day to the Rue de Laval?"

"No, certainly I haven't, my dear young lady, but that would be very imprudent to-day."

"How so?"

"What, cannot you conceive that the mob around your door yesterday has stirred up the district? do you not suppose that the police are on the alert, and are watching all round the house?"

She turned pale, and hung her head.

"Upon my word, I should not be surprised if the commissary of police dropped in to have a look round during the day, and I assure you that it is a very lucky thing you are in safety here. But, anyhow, what is there so urgent that you want to run round to the Rue de Laval?"

"Why," said Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, with some embarrassment, "you can easily understand that it would be motive enough that I want some linen and clothes—"

"Quite easily—the very thing I came to see you about. I will charge myself willingly with the removal, and you need only hand me over the keys."

"My keys! to you? never!" exclaimed Renée.

"I mean to have them," replied Frapillon, looking her steadily in the face.

LX.

IN assuming the imperative tone, Frapillon was merely feeling his way, for he had no intention, for the present, at least, to carry matters to the point of extreme violence. His course had two ends. He had begun by securing the ladies of the pavilion in person, but he preferred to profit by their sequestration according to circumstances. Nobody but himself and his underling, Molinchar, knew what event had placed them at his mercy. It was, therefore, free to him, pursuant to whichever way his interest lay, to keep step with Taupier, Valnoir, and the whole brood of the "Serpenteau," or to operate alone for his own benefit. In the latter case, gentleness was indispensable to pacify the captives, whilst, on the contrary, kind attentions were superfluous if the intention was to suppress them, as the humpback's frightful language worded it. According to his invariable habit, Frapillon sounded the way, whilst ready to modify his tactics at need. It must be acknowledged that his commencement was not happy.

"You mean to have my keys!" repeated Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, laying stress on the words to give more effect to her scorn. "I really was not aware that you had any right to order me."

This was supported by so haughty a glance and so firm a bearing that the pretended physician perceived he was on the wrong path.

"You have misinterpreted the sense of my speech, my dear young lady," resumed he, in a quieter tone. "I am so accustomed to speak to *mentally afflicted* patients that, without thinking, I oft-times express myself too roughly. But you must not bear me any ill-will for that, and I entreat you to overlook it."

Renée did not notice the apology. In fine, she attached but little weight to the shape "Dr." Frapillon pleased to give his addresses to his boarders, but two words in the present one had deeply impressed her. The pretended director of the sanatorium so well grated and enclosed had alluded to a special treatment, of which the bare announcement made the young lady shudder. The dying year had been so full of accounts of arbitrary arrests under plea of madness that she questioned herself whether she might not have been brought unawares into a mad-house. Already, in the outset of his conversation, the singular medical man had mentioned "excitable patients," and these words with twofold significance became disquieting. Wishful to learn at once the state of things, she demanded:

"What do you mean by the mentally afflicted, sir? Are such under treatment here?"

"Indeed, we have some; but we receive all kinds of sufferers," answered Frapillon, tranquilly.

This avowal opened up dreadful vistas to Renée. So here she stood in a mad-house, without knowing exactly where it was situated, and having no means of informing her friends, even supposing she had any in the city, or of interesting extraneous persons in her fate. The scales fell from her eyes, and it seemed to her that an insurmountable barrier started up suddenly between her and the outer world. Then she cursed the rashness which had impelled her to surrender her freedom to a stranger, and but little more and her feelings would have appeared on her features. But the very excess of her danger endowed her with the power of self-restraint and, besides, an instant's reflection made her anticipate slightly less discouraging eventualities. Two women, never before seen, would not be thus imprisoned without motive, and Frapillon's entirely escaped analysis. She knew not a soul interested in committing such an infamous deed, and it was not probable that, in any case, it would be carried with impunity to the extreme. She, therefore, persuaded herself that she only had to deal with an ill-bred fellow, who, perchance, had excellent intentions under coarse manners. So she resolved to reserve her judgment and gain time.

"The companionship of such unhappy persons as have not their reason would sadden me and disquiet me in spite of myself," she said, with much more calmness, "and I fear particularly that my aunt could not be reconciled to it."

"Oh, as to that, fear nothing, my dear young lady; you shall never see or hear them. Why, you might stay here for ever so long and never suspect their proximity."

This suggestion of a possibly long sojourn which Frapillon threw incidentally into his response, gave a chill to Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier.

"I hope," she said, forcing a smile, "that I shall not be put to the test, and that we shall not abuse your hospitality beyond a brief time—"

"Perhaps the siege is only beginning," observed the financial manager of the "Serpenteau," shaking his head like one who knew a great deal more than he cared to utter.

"Indeed! do you think so?" interrogated Renée, unable to prevent turning pale at the prospect of the incarceration extending so as to tire out her strength.

"Paris has provisions enough to hold out six months," sententiously, returned Frapillon who did not know a word about it.

"Heaven will give us courage and patience," resignedly said the young lady.

"And I, on my part, promise you will not be wearied here; perhaps the first look-round is a little dull, but one gets used to it, and, besides, nothing soon will be against you taking your walks abroad—the Buttes are lively enough."

"So, sir, you do not oppose my going out—"

"How now, my dear young lady?" said Frapillon, who had decided to move with suavity, "you are not in prison, and as soon as the Rue de Laval quiets down again, you can go and pay the pavilion a visit."

"I wish it to be as soon as possible," returned Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, somewhat reassured.

"But now I think of it," he said, suddenly. "I must show you how well fitted up your rooms are, and how to call upon your attendants, in order that the shortcoming of this morning shall not happen again."

Entirely calmed by this apparent frankness, Renée could only nod, and upon Frapillon's gracious wave of the hand, as he bowed and pointed to the house door, she preceded him in at the entrance. Scarce had she crossed the threshold before she was struck by the change executed during her short absence. A good fire blazed under the mantel-shelf where the clock was merrily ticking, and the dust had been carefully swept off the furniture. Beyond the little reception room thus vivified so suddenly, there appeared, through the open dining-room doorway, the table covered with dazzling white linen and china and glass. Rather surprised at the celerity with which this laudable metamorphosis had been performed, and almost ashamed of her recent suspicions, Renée turned round to thank the pretended asylum manager for the change, due no doubt, to his intelligent attentions, when she saw nobody! Frapillon, supposed to be following her at the respectful distance of a few paces, had utterly vanished.

For the nonce Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier's amazement became stupefaction. The mock doctor could not have flitted like a phantom, and it was likely that some sensible motive had made him turn back. Seized with restless curiosity, she returned to the door and looked out on the garden. It was empty. The incident greatly resembled a trick in a pantomime, and Renée ran about the narrow square in all directions within the high boundary walls. All was close and insurmountable. At one point only might be an issue: the little low wicket at the foot of the back wall. Having but slightly noticed it once before, the young lady went up to it, and on stooping discovered that at a pinch this trap-door might let a man through. But it was too much like a prodigy for the sham physician, a tolerably stout man, to glide through this gap almost flush with the ground, and Renée could not credit it.

Nevertheless, on scanning the earth more closely, she believed she descried footprints—a man's, too, which the hardened snow had preserved rather imperfectly, but it was sufficient indication, beyond any doubt, of the path the

fugitive had followed. This mode of spiriting himself away was so novel that all Renée's misgivings flocked back to her. She felt, so to say, that the ground was giving way under her, and that mysteries were closing in upon her from every side. Tottering back into the rooms, she went first into the dining-room with a gleam of hope about meeting the woman who had waited on them overnight. But she soon perceived that the breakfast was like everything else—it had come by itself alone. Bewildered, frightened by such unearthly devices, Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier thought of consulting her aunt. Madame de Muire had not yet shown any signs of being up, although her usual waking hour was long since past. Renée softly lifted aside the curtains separating the sleeping-room from the parlour and uttered a shriek of terror—the bed was without a tenant.

LXI.

RENÉE rushed upon the empty bed and laid her hands on the place where her aunt had reposed—it was cold. She rapidly surveyed the room, Madame de Muire's clothes were no longer there or anything else of hers. One could have believed that she had never been there at all, had not the bed been tumbled. Confounded by this strange disappearance, the young lady fell into an arm-chair rather than sat in it, and, resting her head on her hands, endeavoured to collect her seething ideas.

The evening before she had as usual seen her aunt lie down, and had not gone away until after giving her the affectionate kiss which terminated their night's farewell. Madame de Muire, entirely recovered from her nervous accident, had appeared calm, encouraged and full of confidence. She had spoken but little of the day's sad occurrences, but the few words she had allowed to escape her expressed her gladness at having taken a salutary step. Before quitting the pavilion, when Renée had hesitated still about trusting herself to the strange doctor, the less suspicious countess had energetically advised the departure. The drive through the steep, lonely streets, the meanness and smallness of the new home, and the unprepossessing countenances of Molinchar and the servant had not elicited one single observation from her.

"Come in early to me to-morrow morning, my darling," she had said to her niece on her retiring, "and do not forget you are going to the pavilion."

Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier perfectly recalled the last details of this final interview, and this only the more deeply astounded her. How then could she imagine that her relative would take the singular freak of flitting away clandestinely in the small hours? Besides, where would she go, since this lodging, as well walled about and locked up as a gaol, offered no egress? It was more natural to suppose that she had been taken away during her sleep, though this hypothesis seemed ill-founded on even a little consideration. To begin with, Renée's sleeping-chamber was only separated from hers by a thin partition and, however profoundly the young lady may have slumbered from her overwhelming fatigue, she could not believe in such an audacious removal having been accomplished without disturbing her. Moreover, one glance was sufficient to make sure that everything remained in order; neither the bed nor furniture offered the faintest trace of violence. It was clear that this narrow room, where every object remained in the same place as on the night before, could not have been the scene of any struggle. It

was therefore compulsory to admit that Madame de Muire's departure was of her own free will, and yet that was a very unreasonable supposition. How, and at what time, had it been effected? Renée remarked that the candle placed on the bedside table could not have burned for long as it was so little shortened. Her aunt had therefore gone to sleep almost immediately after her leaving her, and everything betokened that she had not awakened before dawn. Whatever the cause of her disappearance, could it have taken place in that short space of time when the sham doctor held her in conversation at the far end of the garden? At the most, this was admissible, and Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier felt a passing intuition moreover of a studied plot to detain her without and profit by her momentary absence to make away with her relative.

"Taken away! but where, where?" muttered the young lady, remembering how the suite was laid out.

The one door of communication with the principal building opened into the dining-room, and the countess could only have passed through that way. Having nothing to learn further in that vacant room, Renée rose and slowly traversed the parlour whose rejuvenated aspect reminded her that it had also been entered during her stroll. Fires do not light themselves of their own volition, and fancy clocks, in particular, do not go without being wound up. In sober earnest these attentions so discreetly paid did not betoken on the part of the master and servants of the house any very hostile disposition. At Mademoiselle Saint-Senier's age, one readily takes alarm, but yet has much ado to believe in sinister designs, and clutches at the least gleam of hope. So she tried to persuade herself that her aunt's absence would be quite naturally accounted for.

"The other doctor must have come in," she reasoned, recalling Molin-chard whom she had hardly noticed, "and have invited her out to see the rest of the asylum whilst the servant was tidying up our rooms."

Without caring to dwell too long on the great unlikelihood of this encouraging conjecture, Renée entered the dining-room, where she had observed the table to be laid. To her great surprise the servant had not confined her attention to setting it out, but had placed the meal on it too. A tureen with the cover off displayed a very appetising chicken patty occupying the place of honour in the middle of the spread, completed by a round Dutch cheese and a plate of raisins. A huge bowl of chocolate smoked on a tray piled up with toast. Lastly, two cut glass decanters contained, the one, some very clear water, and the other, an inviting red wine. At that period of the siege, it was a most luxurious repast, and few Parisians tasted the like, particularly in the far from opulent region of Montmartre. However indifferent Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier was to such bodily comforts, she could not help seeing still more kindly intentions in these preparations.

"My aunt is coming back," she thought, "and the doctor who is showing her round will, doubtlessly, explain matters more clearly than the director."

Upon this consoling thought, Renée set to rearing a superstructure of conjectures, and, whilst awaiting Madame de Muire's return, sat herself down to brood, leaning her elbow on the table and fixing her eyes on the door which she expected her to open at any moment. Nobody came, and in vain did she listen—no sound troubled the deep stillness of the lonely rooms. Sometimes, though, she fancied she could hear steps beyond the wall which bounded her liberty, but on listening more attentively, she dis-

covered that she was the dupe of an illusion. Suddenly, on mechanically dropping her eyes on the breakfast so artfully spread out, she perceived that it was laid for only one person. One napkin on the cloth and one glass beside the plate before her chair, which an unknown hand had placed at the board. This solitary seat said plainly in its own language :

“Wait for no one ; you are to eat alone.”

Renée comprehended this very speedily, and her vague unrest changed to serious dread. It was next to impossible now to doubt that a plot was woven against her. Madame de Muire, it was clear, decoyed hence by some cunning pretext, had been led to another part of the abode of awe, and shut up far from her kinswoman. The unhappy girl saw herself doomed to an isolation of which she did not guess the aim, but she shuddered at the contemplation of the consequences. She sprang up erect, her eyes fixed, her cheeks blanched, and ran about at haphazard, as though maddened by terror, all over the rooms which were undeniably a prison. She saw nothing to confirm or lessen her apprehension, and returned by a kind of instinct to the door which separated her from her second mother whom the scoundrels had taken away. She called her with all her strength, as if she might be heard, till discouraged by the fruitlessness of her attempt, she ran out into the garden. Snow had resumed falling, and the grey-veiled sky threw an uglier shade on the sombre walls that formed the poor captive's horizon. A silence of the dead deepened the horror of this enclosure, for the noise of the town did not reach this deserted summit of the heights. The rumble of the Prussian batteries hard by passed along the clouds like dull thunder. Here she had the inclination to scream out in the hope of drawing the attention of some passer-by, yet she dared not. An almost superstitious fear checked the sound in her throat and paralysed her movements. It seemed to her that the bleak building weighed upon her, as the tombstone does on the wretch buried alive. She felt herself vanquished.

Slowly, with a tottering step, she returned to seat herself before the parlour fire. The blood rushed to her temples, and a burning thirst parched her lips. She made a last effort to go as far as the table where the meal which did not tempt her much awaited her, and pour herself out a glass of water, which she gulped at a draught. Almost instantly she felt a novel sensation. The water was cold, almost icy, yet it sent a hot shiver through her veins. She had just the strength to reel into the parlour and drop upon a reclining chair. To the fever that had thrilled her succeeded a general torpor. Her heavy head drooped on her shoulder and her eyes closed, do what she could. At the same time, odd fancies bubbled up in her brain. She thought she saw the parlour tapestry wave, and indefinite shapes steal over the carpet. At times a sudden creak of the furniture or wainscoting made her over-excited nerves tingle, and then again all she was conscious of was the regular, monotonous tick of the clock pendulum. Through all this benumbing of the mind one terrible idea became clear. She recalled that there existed powerful narcotics and, passing her hand over her glowing forehead, she tried to rise. But she only fell back heavily and all sensation ceased in Renée de Saint-Senier.

PART II.

I.

THE offices of the "Serpenteau" were in an eminently popular quarter; occupying the first storey of a black old house in the Rue Montorgueil, a choice of site due to the suggestions of J. B. Frapillon, who combined a house-agency with his other business. He had insisted upon the desirability of installing oneself in a central position, and, whilst thinking of the interests of the newspaper, he had found means of realising a fair commission for his privy purse. The noisy neighbourhood of the great central Markets was not precisely to Valnoir's taste, for in spite of advanced opinions, he passed his life in more stylish Parisian circles. However, the editor had yielded to the observations of his bosom counsellor, and resigned himself to considerable vehicular outlay, which was eventually refunded out of the company's purse. Moreover, albeit his daily presence during the making up of the paper was indispensable, he did not stay there long. A two hours' sitting in the afternoon, up to the solemn moment of making up the sheet, amply sufficed for Valnoir to impart a peculiar tone of aggressive violence to the socialist organ he directed. With this laudable object he devoted long hours to a complete revision of the articles, and even the news items, carefully peppering them with insults for the greater delight of his worthy readers. As for his own lucubrations, which constituted the bulk of the journal, he wrote them at home, or at his lady friend's, on the Place de la Madeleine. Never did he attack society with more fire, than after having pocketed high remuneration for his literature; never did he shed so many crocodile's tears upon the woes of the down-trodden, than when leaving a jovial dinner, presided over by Madame de Charmière. His short visits to the Rue Montorgueil offices, were therefore in some sort consecrated to the official work of the radical print.

It was there he received the communications brought by amiable citizens whom he certainly would not have spoken to in the street, and listened to the touching complaints of delegates whom he would have taken great care not to admit into his dainty rooms in the Rue de Navarin. There also were discussed the financial operations necessitated by the great transactions of a widely circulated daily. Our friend Valnoir, whom this feature of the enterprise particularly interested, did not disdain entering, when he felt like it, into all the minutiae of the sales, or even receiving with his own hands the money daily coming in from subaltern agents. However, he donned his gloves on going out.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, following the mournful morning when Renée de Saint-Senier was sent to sleep so strangely, the staff of the "Serpenteau" were gathered together at head-quarters. Feverish activity reigned around and under the carriage entrance of J. B. Frapillon's selected edifice. In the yard and up and down the staircases there were several porters and printer's boys scampering about with damp proofs in their inky hands. The peaceable wayfarers who ventured into these commercial regions in quest of undiscoverable potatoes, lingered with some curiosity before so busy a house, but ceased to feel astonished on learning that the bustle was all caused by the manufacture of the famous "Serpenteau," the organ of Red Democracy. In contrast to this plebeian gathering, a very stylish miniature brougham drawn by a thorough-bred, was stationed a few yards from the entrance, under charge of a driver correctly clad in black. Such a relic of West End luxury was so seldom seen at that date that it attracted attention, and more than one tatterdemalion, reduced to the regulation four ounces, ravenously eyed the fat rump of the dark bay. But the coachman, also well filled out, little heeded the hunger sharpened by the view of his horse, but philosophically puffed away at a fine cigar from the elevation of his box and cast rather scornful glances on the plebeians. It was easily guessed that he felt himself upheld by a support capable of imposing respect upon the famished street strollers. In point of fact, the printer's imps, who knew all about the turnout, did not fail to explain to the lookers-on that it was the pretty product of the base coppers contributed by the masses to the purchase of the socialist herald. It is always flattering to know that one's pence have helped to embellish the existence of a friend of the people, and not a soul grumbled, although this equipage really belonged not to Valnoir, the defender of the working man, but to his fair friend Rose de Charmière. The editor contented himself with taking cabs, for popularity like nobility has its laws, and, thanks to this prudent and democratic conduct, he could enjoy all luxuries without losing any claim on virtue and austerity. He was aristocratic only by proxy.

Through the thick of the assemblage enumbering the side walk, a man had glided with that inoffensive jostling which never occasions remonstrance. Distinguished from the common herd, by his snowy neckcloth and gold spectacles, this personage nodded familiarly to the Jehu as he walked past, accepted the salutations of the various workmen grouped under the doorway, and directed his steps to the stairs up to the editorial rooms with the ease of an old frequenter. Frapillon, for he it was thus invading the sanctuary, went up the well-worn stairs on which the carriers' boots had left a lot of sticky mud, and pushed open the door on the first floor with a firm hand. Two or three messengers, dawdling away their time in the ante-room, respectfully arose on seeing him appear, and by their alacrity could be measured the influence enjoyed by the Rue Cadet Metternich in the house. Without pausing, he went through this outer chamber more particularly devoted to low-class visitors, and opened the spring-flap door defending the first office, with the speed of a man who had no time to lose. Then he found himself in the presence of an old acquaintance. Behind a table covered with black leather, sat Antoine Pilevert on a cane arm-chair. Our Hercules still bore on his bearded countenance palpable traces of his previous night's adventures. One of his eyes disappeared under "a mouse" produced by a truly scientific blow. His cheeks, quite black-and-blue gave him a vague likeness to the

Tattooed Savage whom he had often exhibited on fair-grounds, and his hair fell in dishevelled locks on his forehead. His attitude and physiognomy alike expressed profound depression.

At a first glance, he looked like a dying gladiator, but it was also perceptible that he was not going to die sober. A triple row of drained beer glasses protected the baffled, strongest man in the world, and various pipes were spread before him instead of pens, of which this burlesque clerk would not have appreciated the usefulness. The traditional inkstand was replaced by an enormous tobacco jar, and above his head there was a trophy of arms instead of a bookcase. Buttonless foils and fighting swords alternated with horse-pistols, this bellicose display hanging upon the wall there to serve as sign for the fighting editor's special functions. On beholding Frapillon, the poor showman hung his head dolefully, and uttered inarticulate growls in token of contrition. Although the agent had no mind for fun at that juncture, he could not help bursting out into laughter at sight of such discomfiture.

"Well, my fine fellow," he said, making great efforts not to split his sides, "how did the night finish?"

"You ought to know yourself, by the thousand trumpets of Jericho!" retorted Pilevert sulkily.

"Oh, no, I assure you, my dear sir," went on Frapillon, playing the innocent. "I entrusted you to our friend Taupier, and I suppose that he brought you into port."

"Oh, dear, yes, praise your corkscrew man!" cried the mountebank, "he's a nice 'rangatang,' he is!"

"Did you find him lacking in the respect due to a dear brother of the quill?" queried the agent, assuming an air of the most affectionate interest.

"He let me fall into the gutter, and he was the cause of my spending the night in the lock-up. I have had my fill of his respect for a brother of the quill."

"Indeed! Oh, I shall never console myself for having left you so abruptly, my good M. Pilevert. Pray, inform me how you extricated yourself from this perilous pass?"

The reply to this feeler interested Frapillon more than all the rest. It was really important for him to learn how things had gone on after his departure, particularly as concerned the humpback. Amid the complicated snares that he was setting at the same time, this reverer of the laws dreaded nothing so much as the unforeseen.

"Ex-tri-cated! whew!" sneered the Hercules, "it was not he I have to thank if I am still able to smoke a pipe. If M. Valnoir had not written to get us out—"

"Oh, very nice! we have to thank friend Valnoir, eh?"

"Yes, and he had a dreadful amount of trouble to obtain our release. Your humpy had so suspicious a look that the captain on guard wanted to pack us off to prison."

"In short, I see with pleasure you have come back safe and sound," said Frapillon who had ascertained all he wanted to know.

"Safe and sound! a lot! with a black eye, eh? I feel as if I had a fire-man's helmet on, and my throat's like wood!"

"It will be nothing, my dear fellow, nothing—but I must be going, for I think that the other gentlemen are waiting for me."

"They are all there, the whole collection," said the man of thousand sinews, "and 'deed they have been asking after you."

The cashier was no longer listening, but had assumed a sedate mien to cross the threshold of the reserved lair. He softly turned the brass knob, above which was to be read the mighty word: "EDITORIAL," and stepped into the study where Valnoir was lording it over a good and numerous company. The room invaded by Frapillon was ordinarily set apart for Valnoir, who enjoyed the aristocratic privilege of making it inaccessible whenever the fancy took him. Common visitors never got beyond the general hall, where a secretary and two or three apprentice thunderbolt-fingers toiled away with long scissors at their daily task, constituting what is technically termed the regular work of the journal. One had to be true blue—perhaps we ought to say true red, remembering the colours of the "Serpenteau"—to claim the honour of a private audience with Jove on Olympus. Needless to say that the agent fully enjoyed the grand entry, and that of the back-stairs also. Only he habitually discussed personal questions privately with Valnoir, and his surprise was no trifle to see that his friend was surrounded by a little bodyguard. On the right and the left of his armchair sat, as principal supporters, Taupier and Madame de Charmière. Behind them hovered that lanky being Alcindor, who could not keep still, it seemed. All this had a forbidding aspect which struck Frapillon at the start, for he was little accustomed to find such company.

Requested in the morning by a note from Valnoir to come round at three o'clock, warned later on by the doorwarder that the areopagus of the "Serpenteau" was all there, the business man expected to be greeted with quips and cranks, and smothered laughter, according to the rites and customs of the place. But one glance was enough to show him that the wind was not blowing from a joyous quarter, and without knowing what it was all about, he instantly conjured up a suitable countenance. He began by distributing the obligatory grasp of the hand to the three men, then he gallantly kissed the tips of the lovely Rose's fingers, captured a vacant chair and sat upon it in a free and easy fashion, astride, with his elbows on the back before him.

"Well, old friend," he queried of Valnoir, "how have we got on since last week?"

"We have gone up three thousand five hundred," answered the editor, rather frigidly.

"Bravo! that comes from dressing up the articles tastily. Your late castigation of the regular army was worth its weight in gold. Half-a-dozen more such lashings and we shall double our circulation."

"Without counting the romance I started on the day before yesterday," interposed Taupier, "'The New Tower of Nesle, or the Messalina of Modern Times.'"

"Whew! that title is worth twenty thousand more subscribers."

"And my variety column, wherein I develope my Fusionian Theory, will send the sale up thirty thousand to boot," gravely appended Alcindor.

"Thirty and twenty make fifty thousand," went on Frapillon, with perfect gravity, "which, added to our actual circulation, produces the sum total of one hundred thousand copies. Let the siege last three months longer, and we shall all be millionaires."

Valnoir hastened to turn the conversation on a more practical topic, for he all the better realised the ironical tendency of this speech as he set the right value on the humpback's and the Merry Andrew's effusions.

"My dear fellow," he said, trying to assume an easy air, "I wrote you to come and talk over some matters interesting us quite as much as the 'Serpenteau's' circulation."

"So? I think I can guess. You mean our little bother about the Saint-Senier people."

"That and others."

"Very well. Let us take affairs in order," said Frapillon, without any emotion. "To begin with, I suppose you want to know how we stand as regards the ladies in the cottage?"

Valnoir nodded.

"Why did not friend Taupier give you the latest news?"

"I?" squeaked the deformed man, "I know nothing as you gave me the go-by last night."

"Then, I am not in a position to inform you any further. My knowledge ceases, like our dear associate's, at the arrest of the servant, whom, thanks to my help, he succeeded in incarcerating. That's a nuisance we shall be rid of for ever so long."

"Good! How about the young lady whom you were following when you shook me off?" demanded the humpback.

"I lost sight of her, and it was impossible to find her again," answered Frapillon, with uncommon impudence.

Rose, Valnoir, and Taupier exchanged meaning looks which were duly noticed by the sagacious business man. They evidently suspected him of acting on his own account, and the humpback had doubtlessly been malevolently insinuating things against him, which was an additional reason for him to deny everything.

"How clever I was to get through the affair so smartly," he thought to himself.

"I do not see," he remarked out aloud, "why you are worrying yourselves. The hardest part of the task is done, since all the men are got rid of, and it seems to me you haven't much to fear from a couple of lone women."

"Better have a care," rejoined Madame de Charmière, "women are often more to be feared than men are."

"I believe you are right," said Frapillon, with an equivocal smile.

"Anyhow, that is not what interests us most to-day," broke in Valnoir.

"What else, eh?"

"My dear fellow, I have to speak of our association, in the name of myself and our friends."

"Of the 'Pipe-lighters at the Moon'?"

"Just so."

"Very well; and what am I to tell you regarding them?" queried the business-man, with imperturbable calm.

There followed an instant's silence, as though to mark the chief editor's hesitation.

"This is the matter, my dear friend," said Valnoir at length, emboldened by a glance from his lady-love. "During the three months that our society has existed, the adhesions have been numerous, and they have gone on increasing. The result is that, however infinitesimal may be the amount of the weekly contribution paid by the old and new members, we have none the less received sums—"

"Quite so," interrupted Frapillon, icily.

"Of which we only know the figure approximately," went on Valnoir, rebuffed a little by this coolness. "You alone received them as treasurer of the society, you alone are answerable for them, and you have always handled them."

"That is perfectly exact. What inference do you draw?"

"Oh, I know—we all know for that matter—that it is the very essence of our society to operate secretly, and that you do not have to show receipts and petty cash memoranda like an ordinary cashier, still—"

"Go on," said Frapillon, settling his spectacles down on his nose.

"Well, we believe it is possible, and it is desirable, to have our responsibility disengaged in the matter. To keep books, to produce warrants and receipts—"

"You mean to say you want me to show my accounts?"

"I have no need to tell you that your probity is not in doubt, and that our trust in you remains intact," Valnoir hastened to add.

"It appears so, indeed," said the agent, without showing any of his real feelings.

"Besides, it is not we who desire this light on the subject."

"Oh, indeed!" ejaculated Frapillon, but not with an air of belief.

"No; half-a-dozen letters have clamoured for it, and to furnish an explanation, I am obliged to ask it of you."

"Who are these inquisitive people, pray?"

"Shareholders; and I must not withhold from you that the question will be put by the chairman at the next meeting."

"And you warn me so that I may be ready? How very kind on your part."

"Only quite natural, and I hope you are not bearing me any ill will for that."

"I? On the contrary! I even thank you for offering me an opportunity which I have been seeking some time."

"An opportunity? come, come, my dear fellow, do explain yourself more clearly."

"Never mind at present. I will follow your advice, and reserve myself for the general meeting."

Valnoir's supporters, the lady most particularly, appeared to follow this dialogue with sharp interest, and it was not difficult to divine that the little attack had been arranged beforehand. Doubting that no longer, Frapillon wondered whence came the beam thrown so savagely across his track. He knew Valnoir's light and reckless views too well to attribute to him the invention of demanding a reckoning up of the affairs of the society; but he hesitated to which of the others to assign it—Taupier or the lovely Rose. Both seemed quite capable of devising the treacherous stab, and he promised himself he would make the guilty one repent it.

"May I see the style and writing of your amiable correspondents?" he inquired with a tolerably indifferent air of Valnoir.

"Well, I—why, I—I hardly know what I have done with the letters," faltered the editor, visibly changing countenance.

"Good, good, I understand it perfectly," rejoined Frapillon. "Everything ought to be kept in the dark as regards the society of 'Lighters of Pipes at the Moon' and you fear to compromise our worthy friends and adherents."

Valnoir, whose confusion was increasing, tried to find an answer which was slow to come. But a most unforeseen incident drew him from his plight.

II.

THROUGH the door, to the ears of the family gathering, came a hubbub of angry voices resounding in the next room, and threatening to interfere strongly with their deliberations.

The key of the voices rising higher and higher, was indicative of a heated wrangle. Shouting, not speaking, was going on, and it was impossible to make any mistake as to the cause of it. Master Pilevert was the only member of the staff capable of keeping up a colloquy in such a tone, and, whatever might be Valnoir's desire to settle the question raised in his study, he could not remain indifferent to his follower's disputes. The mighty man had been hired by the foresighted Taupier to receive over-excited claimants, and he had so far acquitted himself of his duties to general satisfaction. His surly looks had almost always sufficed to calm the fury of visitors who had to complain of any of the writers on the paper, and when they went beyond looks, the professor of pugilism and fencing, offered them a choice of weapons.

Since he had accepted these functions, he had not met a single person inclined to carry matters to the fighting point, and this circumstance had in no little degree contributed to increase his predisposition to roughness and insolence.

The editor of the "Serpenteau" had even begun to consider his responsible publisher too energetic a champion and more than once he had had the idea of trying to quiet him. On the present occasion Pilevert's wrath seemed particularly untimely, and so he was about to rise, so as to go and see in person what was wrong, when Madame de Charmière, by a glance, reminded him that prudence was the primordial virtue of a politician. So he turned towards Taupier to ask him to undertake the task of appeasing a quarrel of which he already suspected the cause, inasmuch as lately his articles had become so virulent, striking out so fiercely on all sides, that he might well expect some worms to turn. However, Frapillon had all kinds of motives to abridge the audience in which his partners held him on the gridiron as it were, and he eagerly grasped the chance of avoiding a most annoying examination. "I'll go and quiet our bold defender," he said making for the door.

"Remember that Valnoir is at home to nobody—" which recommendation was addressed to him by the fair Rose and completed by the rancorous Taupier's rather rude injunction: "Look sharp, and be back as quick as possible—we haven't half done with you."

"Oh! I only need the time to put a dash of cold water in Master Pilevert's wine, and then I shall be at your disposal again," responded Frapillon, turning the door-nob.

He knew very well that his promise to return would in nowise bind him, and that his dubious friends would not come after him into the fighting publisher's office. He therefore reserved the right to act as best suited his welfare, and he almost decided in his mind to walk quietly home after allaying the tempest. He felt a need to collect his thoughts in the silence of his private office before showing his books to the shareholders of the "Pipes lighted at the Moon," and, besides, he had other matters to attend to during the day.

When he had carefully closed behind him the door, which defended the

wits of the "Serpenteau" against the onslaughts of profane outsiders, Frapillon found himself facing a trio whose excitement had attained a climax. The professor of the noble art of self-defence was evidently preparing for a bout, for he had fallen on guard, athletically posed on his stumpy legs, behind his table, which did duty as a breast-work.

Two adversaries stood before him, and they looked quite as enraged as he did. One, quite young, though wearing the uniform of a captain of infantry, was fidgeting with the handle of his sword, while with the other hand he twisted his moustaches. He was darting furious glances at Pilevert. His companion, an older man, but quite as much exasperated, was a civilian. He was very pale and had crushed up a newspaper between his convulsively twitching fingers. The scene fully apprised Frapillon as to the cause of the dispute; but he assumed his most innocent air in order to elicit full information before he intervened. "What is the trouble, gentlemen?" he inquired, more particularly addressing the civilian.

However, it was the military envoy who took it upon himself to reply. "The matter is this," he said, curtly, "this varlet here has tried to be insolent, and I am going to flog him for it."

"Just come on, old cabbage-sticker!" growled the stroug man, ducking his head and working his hands and arms in the way familiar to professional pugilists.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, pray be calm and explain yourselves, pray do leave off, I entreat you!" appealed Frapillon, generously throwing himself between the infuriated adversaries. "My dear Pilevert," he proceeded, patting the athlete's shoulder, "oblige me personally by keeping quiet. You are really over hasty."

This brief sentence had the immediate effect of calming the irascible Autoine, who far more dreaded the gentle authority of the cashier than the fisticuffs of his civilian or martial adversaries. "I suppose you think it mere fun to be called a blackguard and a bully," grumbled the champion, though he assumed a more pacific attitude.

"I cannot believe," continued Frapillon, softly, "that the gentlemen have insulted you without a motive, and I am desirous of learning—"

"What has happened, of course?" interrupted the elder visitor. "Well, I will tell you, sir, relying on your putting an end to this disgraceful affair by doing justice to our claims."

"I am quite ready, gentlemen, to do so," replied the agent, in his most courteous tone.

"Very well. I suppose you belong to the editorial department of this paper?"

"I am one of its founders," evasively answered Frapillon.

"In that case, sir, you will not be surprised to hear that the articles, recently published in your ma—, ahem! journal, have wounded all those who have the honour of belonging to the French army, and it is only natural that an officer should come to demand satisfaction in the name of his comrades."

"Your sensitiveness is certainly worthy of respect, and yet—"

"Just allow me to finish, my friend; a captain in one of the regiments you insult daily, asked me to accompany him here, and I consented, all the more readily as Monsieur Valnoir, your editor, has long been known to me."

"Oh!" muttered Frapillon, whose attention was roused by this incidental remark.

"Hence, it is with Monsieur Valnoir himself that we wish to deal; and when we were received by this—this fellow who had the impudence to assert that he wrote the abusive articles in question—well, you will understand, I think, we lost patience."

"It would be disgraceful," remarked the officer, "to insult gentlemen and then keep out of the way—letting a hired bravo act as one's representative on the field of honour."

"Gentlemen," eagerly cried the agent, "I affirm that there is merely some misunderstanding here. My friend Valnoir is a man of honour and would not shrink from fighting a duel—"

"I know that," observed the civilian in a tone which gave Frapillon food for reflection. Already an instant before, he had wondered whether this affair was simply the outcome of the spiteful attacks contained in the "*Serpenteau*" or whether it had something to do with the Saint-Seniers. This latter point interested him much more than the disputes in which the paper engaged, and it was important that he should know how things really stood. "Gentlemen," he proceeded, "Monsieur Valnoir is not in just now, but if you will trust me with your cards, I will undertake to deliver them, and explain to Monsieur Valnoir what motive has brought you here."

The two strangers exchanged glances and the elder one curtly answered: "That's needless! we wanted to see Monsieur Valnoir himself, and I will merely ask you to inform him that we shall call on him here at this time to-morrow."

"And I mean to find him when I come again," added the officer in such a tone as to make Frapillon understand that he would be held personally responsible for delivering the message.

"Be easy, gentlemen, I shall not forget the matter," stammered the treasurer, feeling greatly put out when he saw the visitors turning their backs on him without more ado.

They were well into the ante-chamber before the Hercules' voice drew Frapillon out of the deep reverie into which he had plunged.

"A pleasant journey! and I wish we may never see them again!" said Pilevert.

This was the moment, or never, for the Rue Cadet intriguer to decide upon his course as regards the many complicated wires which he pulled at one and the same time. The puzzling point was how to begin. However he did not waver for more than a minute. "My dear Monsieur Pilevert," said he, "what do you say now to a nice dinner, near the Central Markets, at Baratte's by the way? There's capital tittle there!"

"Faith, it just would suit me," answered the strong man heartily. "My throat's dry as tinder."

"Come along then, and smartly too," rejoined the financial man, determined not to return to the inquisitorial council over which his friend Valnoir was presiding.

III.

On the same cold dark December night when the Mesdames de Saint-Senier removed from their home, a man and a woman were hurrying along a narrow path in the Forest of Saint-Germain. The man was clad like a hawker, with a pack on his back and a staff in his hand. The woman

evidently assisted him in his wandering avocations, for she carried her share of the goods in a long bag hanging at her side.

And, yet, anybody who closely scanned the faces and carriage of this pair of nocturnal wayfarers, might have been seized with doubts as to their real station in life. Despite his burden, his blue blouse, his ample velveteen trousers, and his heavy clouted shoes, the man walked otherwise than a pedlar does. His was the firm, regular step of a soldier, and not the slouching stride of a foot-traveller who has no need to press on to reach his destination before the opening of some fair on the morrow. His slender straight figure was erect like a soldier's under the knapsack, and his shoulders, well set back, had not yet been broken in to the stoop inflicted by habit on all those whom avocation turns into beasts of burden. His face was still less in conformity with the attire and manners of the peddling trade. Upon his thin and weather-beaten features there sat an expression of mingled sharpness and steadiness most unusual in a hawker. In fact, except for the complete absence of any beard and moustaches, the fellow's face was that of a soldier—even that of an officer.

On her side—the woman, although she wore a mean drugget petticoat and coarse shoes, had nothing of the aspect of a country girl. Her comely figure was wrapped up in a striped shawl, such as factory hands fancy, and her abundant jet tresses were concealed beneath a red handkerchief tied up in a knot behind, much in the style affected by negresses. However, the harmonious outline of her slight figure was revealed by her walk, and her eyes were too bright, her complexion too fair, and her profile too pure, not to startle an observant beholder.

Whatever their true station and calling might have been, the couple sped on without exchanging a word, and queerly enough, it was the woman who seemed serving as a guide to the man. She took the lead, and every now and then, she stopped short to study the ground. Then she continued her route either by keeping to the path, or choosing others which stretched away through the wood.

At each cross-road, frequently met, the forest of Saint-Germain being one of the best laid out in France, the couple halted for a few seconds, until, after a swift glance around, the woman unhesitatingly plunged into one of the numerous tracks, which formed what woodcraftsmen term a maze. The man followed on in silence, after these brief deliberations. A wave of the hand, a nod or a shake of the head before going onwards, that was all.

To judge by the precautions they took, and above all, by their persistent silence, the pair must have had some great motive for keeping their march secret. In point of fact, the forest was then so little frequented, especially at night-time, that their mere presence at that hour was suspicious. The Prussians, who had occupied Saint-Germain for upwards of three months, were known to be keeping a good guard there, and, in fact, they had not failed to take all their usual precautions. From the outset of their occupation, the splendid trees bordering the main avenues, had fallen under pitiless axes, so as to enable shelter places to be erected, and roads to be barred. During the earlier days of the investment, moreover, the besiegers had not confined themselves to these prudent defensive measures. Frequent patrols scoured the woods in every direction, to say nothing of advanced posts placed with that topographical intelligence of which so many proofs had been given ever since the war began. The free and easy defensive measures taken by the Paris authorities had promptly reassured the enemy however, and, towards the close of the siege, their watchfulness, though still

active on the outer lines of the blockade, had somewhat relaxed in the rear.

Thus, three months earlier, our two wanderers would have stood many chances of falling into an ambush before walking a hundred steps through the woodland, and their journey would have been so roughly checked, that they would probably never have resumed it. However, in these less dangerous times the great points for them were simply to proceed prudently and with a full knowledge of the country round about. These requisite conditions they seemed to fulfil, for the woman appeared to be following a well-known line of route, and the man studied the road on both sides, with infinite care. He must have had a deal of experience in military scouting.

The weather also was somewhat favourable for a night expedition, for the ground was covered with snow, just hard enough not to be squashy, and soft enough to deaden the sound of footsteps. Moreover, the north wind was rising.

The Prussian outposts, supposing there were any nearabouts, would be under cover; even their sentries were hardly likely to be standing still on their beats. The sound of their feet stamping for warmth's sake, might be heard at a distance, as a warning which an experienced observer would duly put to profit.

After marching a long while without any incident occurring, the pedlar and his companion finally came upon a part of the forest where the surroundings changed in aspect. Flat near the town of Saint-Germain, the ground now became more and more rugged.

There were none of the rocks and gorges so frequently found at Fontainebleau, but the paths rose steeply, and descended abruptly, at times overlooking expanses of valley; while farther on the road ran through ravines, shut in by overhanging banks, and here one's pace had to be slackened. The higher branches of the old oaks arched over the track, and intercepted the scanty light from the cloudy sky. Huge stumps with gnarled roots encroaching over the narrow way assumed fantastic shapes in the prevailing dimness and threatened at every instant to interfere with further progress. Far from being repelled by these obstacles and difficulties, however, the feminine guide seemed to advance with more assurance, if not at a faster pace. Judging by her bearing, it was probable that the place was familiar to her, for she oft-times paused to examine some colossal tree, or salient stone with attention; as if she wished to recover fresh starting-points to guide her in her further course.

The man contented himself with following her and keeping up the pace. After such halts, the woman would turn and nod a little, to denote that she had found the route. The man then conformed to the tacit invitation, thus addressed to him, and all without either breathing a word. Perchance, the man feared that the faintest noise would arouse in the gloom not, as Victor Hugo says in his ballad of the Archers, "A demon still debauched by Sabbath revelry," but simply some Prussian soldier fuddled with schnapps or benumbed with the cold. Whatever the true cause of their silence was, never did scouts glide along more silently past hostile camp fires, never did red Indians follow the warpath with great wariness. And the farther they advanced, the more their prudence and attention increased. For one moment, even, the leader suddenly suspended her march and remained motionless. At this spot there began a stony ascent deeply ditched in on either hand. It had a peculiar look not to be forgotten by any one who had ever passed that way.

No doubt, the guide recognised the slope, which a vehicle could hardly have descended without upsetting, and she may have alluded to some such accident, for she suddenly indulged in animated pantomime, pointing out one of the cavities and bending over one side as if to imitate a falling carriage. The man nodded to indicate that he understood her, but on he went without unlocking his jaws.

After this halt, the woman hesitated no more, but sprang forward with a speedier and firmer tread. It was plain she believed that the end of her journey was approaching and she wished to arrive. To her uncertain gropings and uneasy moves succeeded a decision in pace and precision of motion, which left no doubt on that score. After ten minutes' walk, the pair emerged into an open space, in the middle of which there rose up a finger-post; and, although the darkness did not allow the inscription to be read, the woman pointed it out to her companion, who muttered distinctly: "I expect this is the crossway of the *Chêne-Capitaine*."

Whether the woman had not heard his remark or did not care to answer him, she led him on still without saying a word. A hundred steps further off, skirting a broad highway, there expanded a vast clearing with a colossal tree in the centre. The woman then stopped and stretched out her arm. "So here we are," remarked the man, in a low, muffled voice.

IV.

THE open space where the two wayfarers stopped was indeed the same where the Commandant de Saint-Senier had fallen three months previously in an unfair duel. Still this corner of the woods was not unchanged. In the first place, the pile of cut wood no longer existed, the one which had sheltered the witnesses of the fatal encounter. The Prussians guarding the forest had warmed themselves with it and cleared every twig away in their clean way of doing things.

The underbrush, too, had been greatly thinned, and large gaps had been cleared by the German axes. Still the field of honour was none the less recognisable on account of the lone tree marking the centre of the space. It was a very aged oak, with a knotted trunk like a short column sustaining an enormous chapter formed of a score of intertwined boughs. The wintry wind had robbed it of its dome of foliage, but the silhouette of its stripped boughs stood out strongly against the dark sky. It was impossible to pass by without remarking this forest giant, and it had only been respected probably from want of means to fell it. Indeed, it would in itself have furnished more combustible matter than all the wood piles roundabout, and yet still there it stood.

The woman who had pointed it out to her companion had certainly come here previously and now returned with due motives. What she had been seeking amid the night through difficult roads and the complicated windings of the wood was this clearing of the *Chêne-Capitaine*, and she had discovered the approaches with a sagacity that did her recollection honour. On the other hand, the man seemed to have come to the spot for the first time, and yet the exclamation he had uttered indicated that the view of the deserted place awakened many a remembrance. This was because neither of the wayfarers followed the calling which their garments seemed to indicate. The packman, as may have been guessed, had worn epaulets, and was none other than Roger de Saint-Senier. His companion, of course,

was Régine, and this was the first night of their escape effected amid a thousand perils. The accomplishment of duty alone had brought them into this part of the forest, for the road did not take them a long distance from the Prussians, and they would be threatened with great peril when daylight dawned. The only road to a friendly part was the western one, and they turned their backs to it, making towards the Seine, where the Germans had installed many outposts, instead of profiting by this long December night to travel across country to the woodland which stretches into Lower Normandy. On that side, the enemy's armies had only seized hold of isolated points, and it was not hard to slip past their reconnoitring parties, whereas by penetrating still further into the forest, they would surely come out at Poissy or Maisons—in other words, near closely-guarded bridges.

But the two fugitives seemed for the moment busy about anything else than an avoidance of pursuit. Both stood motionless at the edge of the clearing, influenced by a like feeling. Apparently they dreaded walking on the frozen soil where guiltless blood had been spilt, a superstitious dread rivetted them to the spot where they had first stopped. It was the very site where the showman and Alcindor had stationed themselves on the look-out on the morning of the duel. This was easily recognisable by the marks left by the heap of wood on the ground. A few paces on the left was the underwood whence Régine had rushed forth after the fall of the commandant struck in the chest by Valnoir's bullet. These topographic particulars now seemed to engross her attention, for she looked around her attentively as if calling up the scene. Roger did not stir, but his attitude betrayed his sincere emotion. After an instant's musing scrutiny, the young woman appeared to have found what she sought, for she touched her companion's elbow and beckoned him to follow her. She proceeded towards the venerable oak, taking care to slant to the right and stopping at five or six steps from the trunk. There she looked around her again, trying to find some landmark previously fixed in her mind before crossing the expanse. Then by stamping and pointing to a place on the ground, she explained something which her companion immediately understood.

He took off his pack, set it down against the tree and began opening it. The girl did the same with her bag and went down on her knees to examine the ground more closely. At first sight, though it was less dark here than in the underwood, it was very difficult to notice any difference in the level ground. The snow had uniformly covered the sward crisped by the frost, and it spread afar like a white carpet. Nevertheless, on looking down with minute attention, and moreover by feeling with one's hands, there was a slight ridge in a regular line as if some soil had not been accurately replaced after having been dug out.

There was no reason to doubt but what this was the place where Valnoir and his accomplice Taupier had been digging during the night hours prior to the duel! Here therefore would be unearthed the secret buried at the foot of the tree, and it was clear that the two fugitives had come on no other errand. Thus was explained their dangerous journey through the forest and Régine's endeavours to find the crossways.

Out of his pack Roger now drew a small garden hoe, of a size and lightness that admitted of easy carriage, though it was not easy to use it rapidly. Nevertheless, Roger knelt down beside Régine, and ardently began to work. The first digs sent the snow-crust flying, and by laying the sward which it had covered bare, the accuracy of Régine's forecast was

confirmed ; the soil had been cut up by a spade, and replaced by the hands of man. This certainly increased Roger's courage, and he continued to dig vigorously. He was robust, though slightly built, and his muscular arms plied the little pick so steadily that the work went on apace, despite the toughness of the earth, hardened by the frost. Still, although the amateur delver had plenty of good will and power, he had no practice. Navvy's work is not very difficult, and requires no heavy dose of intelligence, but still it needs an apprenticeship for one to accomplish it properly. Thus, not being prepared for the exercise, Roger worked harder than any field labourer, but did less work. His hands, unaccustomed to such toil, were soon blistered, and the work grew more difficult as the depth of the hole increased. Régine helped so far as she could. She scraped out the clods with her delicate hands, grasped the sharp flints at the risk of hurting herself, and then threw them aside with surprising deftness. But, despite their united efforts, after fully half-an-hour, they had not driven their shaft down a foot, and Roger appeared very wearied. The girl, who did not lose sight of him, then motioned him to rest awhile, and the pair sat down beside the shallow pit. Roger stared into space with the look of a careworn man. At times the rustle of the wind stirring the dry leaves, or the snap of a bough, made him start, and he turned quickly to see if anything moved on the edge of the under-brush. But as soon as he realised that the alarm was unfounded, he resumed his pensive immobility.

After ten minutes' repose he again set to work, and this time with feverish ardour. The soil flew up under the blows of his miniature mattock, so that the hole was visibly enlarged. He had almost reached the depth at which the deposit, whatever it was, ought to be embedded, and yet his implement had not encountered any obstacle. Régine had ceased to aid him manually, as if she feared coming into contact with whatever was buried there. At last, however, a cry involuntarily escaped Roger. His tool had struck against something hard, and a dull, dead sound had followed upon a metallic ring. Hearing this he was about to fall on more fiercely when Régine laid her hand upon his shoulder. Then he raised his head and looked before him. A light shone through the trees in the thick wood.

V.

AT this sight the pick fell from Roger's hands. It was difficult to imagine a more provoking mishap since it occurred just as the goal was being reached. Whatever was the object concealed in the pit, there it lay barely covered by a sprinkling of earth. A few digs more and it would be unearthed, but it was sovereignly imprudent to proceed. Indeed the light perceived and indicated by the dumb girl became more and more distinct. It disappeared at instants and then reappeared, which proved that it was carried by some men walking in the wood. By its faint gleaming and its lack of elevation above the ground, one could also conjecture without much fear of error that it was a lantern hanging from someone's hand.

Roger made these remarks at once and concluded without any hesitation that he was in the presence of a night round. The forest-keepers having long since retired, this could only be a Prussian force and the encounter singularly complicated the situation.

It was terrible to have to leave the place without carrying out the undertaking for which the escaped lieutenant had risked liberty and indeed his life. However, on the other hand, to linger on the brink of the unfinished excavation would mean exposing himself to recapture and delivering the secret up to the enemy. Although terribly perplexed, Roger realised the imperious necessity of coming to an immediate decision. The leaves were heard rustling and the fallen branches cracking under the heavy methodical tread of the patrol, which was undoubtedly manœuvring so as to emerge from the thicket into the open space. If Roger's decision was to retire he must do so before the detachment came in sight.

The officer turned and questioned the sharer of his perils by a glance; and he at once saw that she had already made up her mind. With her feet she was pushing back the freshly thrown up soil—a proceeding full of eloquent meaning.

"By Jove, she's right," thought the lieutenant; "the hole must be filled up to prevent the Prussians seeing anything if they come near, and we can hide in the brushwood until they have passed on."

This was truly Régine's plan, for after a moment she sprang up and seized hold of her bag while Roger hoisted his pack on his back. Resuming her functions as a pilot, the girl then went round the oak and proceeded in a stooping posture to a plantation of nut trees rising up at the edge of the clearing in the opposite direction to that by which the Germans were approaching. The officer followed her, bending his head and grasping his little mattock which at a pinch might perhaps serve him as a weapon of defence. The faint sound of a conversation in an undertone fell at intervals upon his ears and when he turned, at the moment he reached the friendly shelter of the saplings, he distinctly discerned a troop leaving the wood on the other end of the clearing in which uprose the *Chêne-Capitaine*.

Régine's chosen refuge was precisely the one that had served her as an observatory on the day of the duel, and it was very appropriate for such a purpose.

At the foot of the wild walnuts, which chance had scattered about this part of the forest, there was a luxuriant and inextricable mass of brambles which hooked on to the lower branches of the trees and drooped downwards, then again arching over, and only leaving one gap in all the network. A deer path led up to the spot—a thorny way which Régine daringly trod the first. Once sheltered in this arbour, the pair might believe themselves in safety, and enjoy that most valuable advantage under the circumstances, of seeing without being seen. Roger made a seat of the pack and bag for his companion who must have been in need of repose, and then began looking around with all his eyes. He was not very uneasy, for he opined that the Prussians would cut through the clearing to reach the road, and that he would only lose time, by having to wait till they were gone.

Meanwhile the round advanced out of cover. As well as could be judged in the darkness, and at that distance, the party was composed of half a dozen men in two ranks.

The lantern bearer, probably a corporal, marched alone at the head of the band, the gleams of his light falling every now and then on helmet spikes and gun barrels. According to the usual method, the men moved slowly and halted at every ten paces or so to reconnoitre the ground.

Roger could distinctly see the corporal hang his lantern behind his back, so that its rays might not daze him, lift his head like a pointer, and look around him. The lieutenant knew enough about the enemies of France,

not to be surprised at their caution, still the lantern astonished him. "They would not carry a light to go through the woods, and they must have a post somewhere near at hand," he thought.

This supposition was disquieting as it did not let him hope for the speedy departure of the Prussians. Events were about to justify his apprehensions. After a final halt half-way from the thicket, the vigilant non-commissioned officer gave an order in a harsh voice to his men, who at once marched towards the large tree. The two fugitives were now in a state of great emotion.

The German soldiers had become proverbial for their skill in discovering precious objects imprudently confided to Mother Earth. They knew much better how to find buried treasures, than water wizards know how to find springs, and anybody might conclude that they scented out wine buried under the soil, even as pigs rout out truffles in Périgord. How could one hope that the excavation near the tree would escape their greedy eyes?

If they dug up the soil at that spot, the secret barely covered over would be revealed to them. Neither Roger nor the tight rope-dancer knew what the concealed object was, for although the latter had seen Taupier and Valnoir digging a hole on the morning of the duel, she had no notion as to what they had concealed in it.

But she must have had powerful motives to seek to penetrate the mystery since she brought Roger de Saint-Senier hither when scarce escaped from the restraint of a two months' captivity. In the meantime the Prussians had gathered around the tree, at so short a distance that the fugitives missed none of their movements. At the corporal's commands, the guns were stacked up and the men set to warming themselves by stamping and flapping their hands across their breasts with evident gratification. Their leader had put down his own gun and lantern and set to lighting a large china pipe. Was this merely a halt or did they mean to bivouac there? Roger, uneasy on the point, was soon relieved of uncertainty. One of the Germans collected the dry leaves and twigs near the old oak, another one struck a match and the rest of the squad dispersed to cut some wood in the thicket whilst the corporal posted a sentinel over the piled guns. Not the least doubt could be cherished any longer. The detachment were settling down here for the rest of the night.

The spot seemed chosen without any malice aforethought, and simply because the big oak supplied a shelter against the wind and a back-log for a fire. The excavation incompletely made and so imperfectly filled up, on Roger's hurried departure, did not appear at first to have attracted the foe's attention. But would this happy indifference last? That was far from likely, and Roger did not rely upon it. In this strained condition of affairs, the only reasonable course the officer and the girl could take was to remain close in their covert, until the enemy decided to go away. The worst then that could happen to them would be to pass the night there, for the rounds generally picked up such detached posts at daybreak. Besides, it was highly risky to try flight. The thicket had but one tolerably practicable outlet, that opening on the clearing, and nobody could dream of making off that way. To escape by the other side crawling through the briars was an almost impossible undertaking, above all with a woman and baggage. Besides, the Germans had sharp ears and the least sound would infallibly set them on the runaways' trail. Lastly, if by good luck the concealed object escaped the soldiers' attention, there was still the chance of finishing the work they had interrupted, after their departure. Accordingly, Roger had

every reason to keep quiet, albeit he did not await the coming day without lively anxiety. His escape must be known at Saint-Germain, and it was very important for him to profit by the night in gaining a start.

He was soon drawn from his brown study by the alarming proximity of a Prussian, who was chopping off some branches. He not only heard him, but he smelt the sharp odour of Hamburg tobacco driven through the copse by the wind. Here was a fresh danger, for Régine was choking with a suppressed cough, and, moreover, the soldier might take the fancy to come up to their thicket. Luckily, however, he had completed his faggot, for he went away, singing. Roger observed him direct his steps towards the central oak where his comrades had already piled up the materials for a very fair fire. They blew upon the leaves kindling at the root of the tree, and the corporal's own attention was absorbed by the interesting proceeding, when all of a sudden a very bright light burst forth not twenty paces from the hiding-place in the wood.

"Fire!" muttered Roger in alarm.

VI.

It was indeed a fire that had broken out in the undergrowth only a short distance from the harbour of refuge. In lighting his pipe, the soldier must have dropped a spark on the litter of dry leaves, and that had sufficed to set it alight, and also cause the dry twigs to catch. Owing to the frost, which had lasted ever since the beginning of November, all damp had been driven out of the wood, which burnt as in midsummer. The flame ran up the stems, and the north wind drove the smoke into the nearest copse. In the already critical position of Roger and his companion, this additional affliction was most dreadful. They looked wistfully at one another, and had they been able to exchange thoughts, they would really have asked each other if they had not better flee. But Régine's infirmity doomed her to silence.

The danger was not yet a pressing one, though it presented itself double-faced. In the first place, the fire might spread nearer and nearer, and its brightness attract the Prussians' attention. Even now they were laughing noisily and crying out with coarse glee among themselves. To see the French woods on fire was a choice diversion, and it was little likely that they would disturb themselves to put out the conflagration started by their carelessness. Still it was to be feared that they might decide to come closer to contemplate so agreeable a sight, in which case the hidden pair would run the risk of being discovered. It was true that there was a possible compensation in the Germans' heed being necessarily diverted from the pit at the foot of the oak. Unfortunately the fire had quickly assumed considerable dimensions. The grass and brambles, and then the underwood had become an insufficient prey, and the saplings crackled as they began to burn. It became clear that the fire would not burn itself out for want of food, and as the clump of brush around the two travellers was so near the flaming stuff, it would inevitably be absorbed in course of time. On the other hand the open space was too broad for the central tree to be reached, so that the soldiers had nothing to fear.

Roger quickly perceived that the shelter would not long be tenable. The heat of the enormous brazier was already being felt, and the smoke grew unbearable. He motioned Régine to hold herself ready for an

emergency, and set the example by hanging his pack on his shoulders. She rose without any token of fear, took up her bag and calmly awaited the moment that would decide her fate. The gleam of the conflagration was cast afar and fully illumined the group of soldiers. They had ceased to busy themselves with their camping preparations, no doubt thinking that their fire cut a mean figure beside the other colossal outbreak. They were tranquilly leaning with their backs against the oak, delighting in the work of destruction which did not affect them, and pointing out one to another the progress of the fiery element. One episode of the disaster particularly caught their attention. In the midst of the burning clump stood an isolated birch tree, whose smooth white trunk burnt like a candle. They watched with curiosity the effects of the flame licking the spluttering bark and gaining the upper boughs which were successively transformed into dazzling girandols. It resembled a set-piece of fireworks, and roars of mirth uprose as each branch broke away and sent up a jet of sparks.

It is but fair to add, however, that the corporal did not seem to be so very gay over the unexpected show. Smoking his pipe, he walked around the stacked muskets and stopped from time to time to examine the rather circumscribed boundary of the open space. Perhaps as the leader of the party, he was worried by the responsibility befalling him for having let a forest, of which strategy might have need hereafter, burn with such indifference. Still he appeared undecided whether he ought to remain on the spot or retire in good order in search of reinforcements.

Roger was observing the progress of the fire from his own side with as much care and interest as the Prussians, but with quite other thoughts. The blazing birch tree would not be slow to fall, and the sheltering thicket was not far enough off to be out of the radius. Here was a fresh, grave danger for the refugees. If the tree fell in their direction, they would almost infallibly be crushed by the weighty incandescent mass. Were they by a miracle even to escape this peril, the contact of the blazing trunk could not fail to spread fire amidst the brushwood. It was a slower death in prospect, but a hundred times more dreadful one. And what added to the horror of the dilemma was that nothing could be done to avert it unless by risking a flight under the enemy's bullets. The hiding-place was so narrow that they could not creep away far enough to avoid being annihilated by the birch tree which the fire was now devouring at its base. Already it leaned over, and the minutes could almost be reckoned that remained before the catastrophe. It was not for himself that Roger felt any fear. In coming with his battalion to defend Paris, he had already offered the sacrifice of his life and, since the commencement of the siege, he had gone through tests hard enough to teach him to despise death. On the very day when he had made up his mind to escape from the Saint-Germain hospital past the hostile sentinels, he knew perfectly well to what he was exposing himself—the risk of being retaken and shot. But he could not face the idea of seeing perish beside him the girl who had so generously devoted herself in order to deliver him. If, by giving up himself, he could have saved the dumb girl, Roger would not have hesitated. But events had so closely interwoven their fates that they were doomed to die together if heaven would not save them both.

The heroic girl herself showed no sign of alarm. She viewed her companion calmly, and there was so much firmness in her bearing, that the officer almost reproached himself for trembling for her. At the same time he struck his brow in desperation as if to force out some idea that might pre-

serve them from the horrible fate now impending. At the very moment when he was perhaps going to attempt an almost impossible rush, he heard a whistle blown three times and in irregular fashion, and also a dull sound, of the nature of which a soldier could make no mistake. It was the tramp of a company on the march. Roger understood on the instant what was happening. The gleams of the conflagration had become visible afar and had been perceived by the Prussian main-posts in the forest, and a numerous detachment was now hastening towards the scene. The whistling was from the prudent corporal, who considered, after ripe reflection, that he ought to reveal his presence in the clearing. The last hope of the fugitives died away. The relief company coming up, guided by this appeal, would most undoubtedly join the others already encamped near the great oak, and, once united, all the men would cut down the brush-wood to circumscribe the fire. The hiding-place would therefore be surrounded, unless, indeed, the soldiers believed it worth while to enter it to lay it low. In either hypothesis, the unfortunate refugees were lost. Roger grasped the girl's arm, and pointed towards the clearing, as much as to say :

"Will you brave the shots by fleeing that way?"

Her nod let him understand that she was ready. There was not a second to lose, and Roger took her hand to spring out with her. A sharp crackling suddenly arising behind them made him turn round. The undergrowth had caught fire there. A flaming brand sailing on the wind, had suddenly fallen on the dry grass, now aflame, but chance had directed it to where the bushes were few and far between. Roger smothered his cry of joy and restrained his companion. Heaven had sent him the idea he sought. The conflagration itself assumed the task of opening up a fresh road by sweeping thence the imprisoning brambles, and furnishing a means of escaping from the Prussians. But it would require time for its task, and the tree three-parts consumed might tumble over at any moment. The lives of two human beings depended on the resistance of a frail tree which had been burning for half-an-hour. Whilst Roger watched the progress of the destruction with unspeakable anxiety, the tramp tramp of the soldiers warned him that the Prussian reinforcements would soon appear. If they came out of the wood by the road passing behind the copse, the retreat would be cut off. At this supreme moment all efforts became useless. All they could do was to offer up prayers for the protective bushes to be devoured before the birch tree fell, and for the new force to appear on the side of the clearing. Thus twenty seconds passed away. Then one heard a frightful cracking, precursor of the downfall, and the birch-tree slowly began to bow.

VII.

At this very instant, the head of the Prussian column abruptly appeared at the edge of the clearing. It consisted of a hundred men led by an officer, and they signalled their arrival with a formidable hurrah. It was already a great piece of luck for the hapless refugees that they were not to be surrounded by the foe, but their escape was not yet practicable. At present the tree that threatened to crush them only kept upright by a miracle, while as for the various bushes past which they expected to flee, these burned away slowly, and the space was not cleared enough to furnish a safe passage. Meanwhile the minutes seemed hours. The fire strangely illuminated

the scene, and so vividly that things could be distinguished better than in daylight. Roger saw the officer of the detachment, giving orders and waving his hands, and the helmeted soldiers break up into groups with hatchets in hand. They only awaited the word to fly about in all directions, and commence the felling, which would localize the conflagration. For the first few instants the bustle of preparation occupied their attention, but they could not long miss perceiving the fugitives, who now clearly stood out against the luminous background of the flaring bushes.

"Are you ready?" asked Roger in an undertone, forgetting in his trouble that the girl could not hear.

But his gesture supplemented his speech and she so fully understood him that she made an onward step.

"*Vorwärts!*" shouted the Prussian officer, and his soldiers leaped out.

This was the moment which Roger seized upon. Placing the girl behind him so that he should shield her with his body, he dashed with lowered head through the fire. The space to cover was not wide but the peril was great. Over burning embers lay the road and blazing branches, barring it, to be pushed aside. To a man looking on, the feat would have appeared impracticable, but excess of danger super-excites courage at the same time as it augments strength, and, in extreme cases, boldness becomes prudence. Naturally adroit and vigorous, Roger accomplished with singular good fortune the double task of traversing the fiery furnace and preserving his companion. He managed to gain the nearest path with no other accident than a scorching of the left hand, and when he turned round he saw Régine safe and sound beside him. At the same instant, as he stepped out of the radius of the fire, down fell the birch with a frightful crash, covering with flaming embers the spot they had just quitted. The overthrow of the forest giant was hailed by cheers, the Germans having doubtlessly awaited this event to enter upon action. Both the danger of the fire and that of capture had been eluded at the same time. But Roger clearly comprehended that he had not yet finished with the latter if he lingered hereabouts, and that he must get away rapidly at any price. Even to waste a moment in breathing, was to run the risk of losing all the fruit of his happy audacity, for man was not less to be feared than fire. So he grasped Régine's hand and dragged her into the undergrowth as yet on the other side of the path.

They had not gone a dozen steps before three soldiers suddenly showed themselves on their right. The girl perceived them the first; she leaped on one side and set to running in the opposite direction with all her strength. Roger executed the same movement with much agility and presence of mind, but it was too late. Sharp as had been the act, the Prussians were so close and the woods were so well lighted up by the flames that the fugitives were perceived.

"Halt, halt!" shouted the Germans.

The officer and his companion took care not to obey and the injunction only gave them wings. Then commenced a mad chase in which the soldiers had all the advantage. To begin with, they were three and might separate to block up the road. Again they only carried axes whilst the fugitives were bowed beneath their rather weighty loads. Finally the pursuers arrived fresh and rested from camp and the French couple had been walking many hours. It was hard to suppose that the girl's little feet encased in wooden shoes would outrun the Tentons so well shod. Nevertheless neither she nor Saint-Senier lost courage. They understood one another at

a glance and ran along side by side, turning now and again to see if the pack were recruited by fresh hounds. The whole question lay in that. If the rest of the band joined in the hunt, all was over with the fugitives; but in the contrary case, a faint chance of safety remained. In a few minutes, the lieutenant acquired the certainty that the bulk of the company were busy in extinguishing the fire and not in pursuing them. As for the trio whom an unfortunate mischance had thrown across their path, they did not have their firearms with them and consequently could not stay them with their shots.

This was encouraging, and Roger, who doubted nothing when it was a question of bravery, already thought that his pick would be of use if they came to a hand-to-hand struggle. His tool was but a paltry weapon to parry three hatchets, but it had some value if well handled. The first thing was to gain enough start to prevent the noise of a scuffle attracting a reinforcement from the enemy, and to find a spot propitious for renewing at a pinch the celebrated policy of the young Horatius who made the three Curatii bite the dust by tackling them one by one. For the time being, the occasion of employing this historical stratagem did not seem near, for the Prussians ran in a body as on a military manœuvre. But, although they constantly accelerated their strides and shouted, to cheer themselves on, they did not reduce the fugitives' advance. However the underwood through which the race went on became less thick, which was a disadvantage. Nimble and more supple than the hunters, the fugitives could utilise all the natural stumbling blocks to bother them, but on open ground it would become more difficult to elude them. Several times already one or another of the chasers had tripped on a stump or stone, the delays always giving the fugitives a few steps' gain. Régine did not appear fagged, and her defender, who kept an eye upon her, almost envied her spirit, for he himself felt he would not be able to rattle much longer on at this pace. Suddenly they came upon some young birch trees marking an abrupt finish to the woodland. Beyond extended a much wider tract than that of the *Chêne-Capitaine* and farther on still quite a wide road opened into the forest. In the centre of this plain, betwixt plantation and brush, extended a whitish patch which stood out against the dark heather.

After a second's hesitation, the girl darted straight in this direction, touching her companion's arm to warn him to be on the watch. At this juncture, the Germans were not more than twenty paces behind, and their hoarse cheering could be very plainly heard. On reaching the lighter-hued ground, Roger understood his friend's design. The whitish patch was simply a crust of ice upon a pool, a double lakelet divided by a narrow neck of firm land. Without slackening her gait, Régine motioned to her companion to keep up this causeway, still invisible to their followers. The causeway was crossed in a trice, and less than a minute after, the Frenchman felt unspeakable satisfaction at hearing a significant crack behind him followed by a volley of resounding oaths. The three Prussians had come upon the frozen expanse together, and their heavy boots had crushed through the fragile crust before they could restrain their impetus. The fugitives, turning round, saw them caught in the congealed mud, even to the waist, in spite of their lubberly efforts to get out. One of them, luckier or less clumsy than his comrades, did half climb upon the isthmus, and meant to continue the pursuit, but his fellows hung on his skirts with cries of distress. It was manifest that they would not let him leave them in the slough, and that their rescue would take some time.

Although the sight was a pleasant one, Lieutenant Roger did not linger to enjoy it, but redoubled his speed to clear the rest of the open with his companion. When they reached the edge of the forest, their enemies were still stuck in the marsh into which the girl's cunning had led them. The road the lucky ones now took ran through flourishing vegetation, and by its breadth it might be conjectured that it conducted to a town, or at least a large village. This was an excellent reason to keep out of it, and so Régine, who seemed to know the country thoroughly, turned unhesitatingly into a by-path. After a few minutes' rapid walk, they came up to a large rock behind which the guide pointed out to her companion the rustic roof of a log-hut. Roger was quite exhausted, and he pushed the door of this providential refuge open all the more readily as they heard no more of the Prussians.

"What the deuce do you want?" roared a man, at the very time when the fugitives dashed across the threshold.

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